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INFINITE STRATOS

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“I-I-Ichika?”

Out of the shower room came my childhood friend Houki, with whom I was just barely reunited.



“Now dance!

*Dance to the waltz of me,
Cecilia Alcott, and Blue Tears!”*

Blue Tears

A third generation, cutting-edge IS unit developed in Britain. The design goal of the BT program was to allow the pilot to manifest and control autonomous units with their mind which would normally be difficult to command. These experimental units are called 'bits,' which stands for "Bluetears Innovation Trial," and also symbolizes their subordinate nature.

Contained inside the shoulder armor are four laser bits and two missile bits, with two laser bits and one missile bit forming each pad. Within each bit's thruster resides an individually operated crystal condenser, resulting in their unmistakable shape.

Japanese Name: "Souteiki" (Blue Tears)
Unit Code: BT-01
Generation: Third
Country: Britain
Classification: Long-Range Firepower
Equipment: BT Energy Rifle, "Starlight Mk.III"
CCW Interceptor
BT System, "Blue Tears" (four laser bits, two missile bits)
Armor: Standard BT, Third Grid Armor II (Experimental)
Main Concept: Mind Interface Weapon, "Blue Tears"

Shenlong

It was hoped that this unit would be a marked improvement over other third-generation units. Focus was put on efficiency and practicality; as such, it boasts excellent statistics.

The PIC system allows for use of atmospheric pressure as a weapon via a kind of gravity control device. The impact cannon generates balls of high pressure in mid-air and lobbs them at the target. Both the barrel and resulting projectile are transparent and invisible.

The output of the impact cannon can be controlled to launch either individual, high-pressure balls or smaller ones in rapid-fire. However, the range is relatively short and performs poorly compared to long-range capable units like Blue Tears.



Japanese Name: "Kouryuu"
Unit Code: Armor Fang-III
Generation: Third
Country: China
Classification: Short-to-Medium-Range Firepower
Equipment: 2x Large Blades, "Soutengagetsu" (can be combined)
2x Impact Cannons, "Ryuuhou"
2x Arm-Mounted Mini Impact Cannons, "Houken"
Armor: Variable Hardness Heavy Ignis armor
Main Concept: Atmospheric Pressurized Impact Cannons



Orimura ICHIKA Right

Shinonono HOUKI Left

Chapter I

All My Classmates Are Girls

Chapter II

The Battle For Class Rep!

Chapter III

*The Transfer Student Is
A Second Childhood Friend*

Chapter IV

Showdown! The Class League Match



Orimura Ichika

The only male in the world who can pilot an IS. His personal IS is “Byakushiki.”



Shinonono Houki

Ichika’s childhood friend—reunited with him after six years. Has no personal IS.



Cecilia Alcott

The British National Cadet.
Her personal IS is “Blue Tears.”



Huang Lingyin

The Chinese National Cadet.
Her personal IS is “Shenlong.”

Chapter I: All My Classmates Are Girls

"Everyone is present, I see. Well, then. Time to start the short homeroom period..."

Yamada Maya, our vice homeroom teacher, smiled in front of the blackboard. She was fairly small, about as tall as a student. Perhaps her clothes were too big for her, but they fit too loosely, which made her look even smaller. Additionally, her black glasses were pretty big and looked out of place. It seemed unnatural, like a child putting on an adult's clothes... I had a feeling she was trying to make herself as tall as possible, but it might have been my imagination.

"Okay, everyone. Let's get along during the next year."

"....."

There was an awkward nervousness in the classroom, and not a response was uttered.

"O-Okay. Please introduce yourselves. Um... The same sequence as the class roster, please."

I felt sorry for our flustered vice homeroom teacher, and figured I had to respond somehow, but alas, that would have been foolish. You see, the reason was simple: All my classmates were girls.

It was the day of the opening ceremony. The beginning of a new life. That was great. Honestly, it was. The problem was, really, that I was the only man in the classroom.

—This... is going to be harder than I thought it would be...

I wasn't imagining it; everyone was looking at me. The seat I'd been assigned was part of the problem. It sat in the front-middle of the room. Whether you wanted to or not, you drew attention like hell there.

I looked over towards the window.

"....."

I had hoped to be rescued by what I would see there, but my heartless childhood friend, Shinonono Houki, was gazing out the window instead. The cruel girl. Was that how anybody treated their childhood friend after seeing them again after six years?

—Hm... Maybe she hated me now?

"...ra."

"Orimura Ichika."

"Y-Yes?!"

I was startled to hear my name spoken so loudly. Predictably, the others giggled. It became harder and harder to calm down. I wasn't particularly uncomfortable around girls. There were just... limits to it. Even if you love ramen, if you ate it three times a day you'd soon get sick of it. Not that I had tried. I didn't even like ramen all that much... Anyway, that wasn't the point.

The point was, I was the only man in the class. All other 29 students were girls. The vice homeroom teacher was a woman. And the homeroom teacher was... probably a woman. I hadn't seen her yet. That just raised the question of what was she up to?

"Um... I'm sorry if I startled you... A-Are you upset? Are you... I'm sorry. Really sorry. But... We started the introductions at A and now we're at O... Like Orimura... So... I'm sorry, all right? Can you introduce yourself? Or... N-Not?"

Yamada Maya, my vice homeroom teacher, was apologizing profusely to me. Her strangely large glasses were moving back and forth, and I was afraid they would fall down; that was all I could bring myself to pay attention to. Was she really older than I was? I wouldn't have doubted someone who told me she was my own age.

"Oh, uh, it's all right. Don't apologize... I'll introduce myself. Please calm down, Ms. Yamada."

"R-Really? Really, really? P-Promise me. Promise me!"

I could see the enthusiasm in her eyes as she looked up and took my hand. I was the center of everyone's attention again. Well, that wasn't going to scare off a real man, was it? I had to introduce myself. Besides, if I made a bad impression right off the bat, things would escalate in the wrong direction. I didn't want that.

I stood up and turned around. All those gazes I had felt upon my back were now aimed squarely in front of me. Even Houki, that heartless girl, was now looking directly at me, instead of away. With everyone looking at me, I couldn't help but be on edge despite not having a problem with girls. Even if you really like curry, you see— No, I already talked about that.

"U-Um... I'm Orimura Ichika. I hope we can get along," I said, bowing politely.

The gazes continued. They were clearly asking for more. I could see it written on their faces that they craved more info. Well, there wasn't much to say. I had some hobbies, of course, but I wasn't particularly motivated to tell the world about them, and it seemed weird to me to tell people about it in an introduction. If, during the introduction, a girl said that she enjoyed growing cacti, I'd find that pretty off-putting (incidentally, my hobbies weren't growing cacti, just so we're clear.)

"....."

I felt the sweat running down my back. I wasn't sure what to do or say. Why was I in that situation to begin with?

"It's... kinda cold..."

It had been the middle of February. I'd been in middle school, third year, studying hard for the entrance exams.

"Why do I have to travel four stations to take the entrance exam of my nearest high school? And it's even extra cold today..."

There'd been cheating the year before, so all the schools announced the exam venue only two days ahead. It was pretty ridiculous, but there was nothing I could do about that as a simple student. All that was left to me was to grumble on the way to the exam.

The school I was trying to get into was Aietsu Academy, a school close to home; average in the rankings, and which had a festival every year. It was a private school, but the tuition was very low. Exceptionally low. Why, you ask? Well, 90% of the students who graduated were hired away by affiliated companies. We weren't in a deep recession or anything, but I was glad they were willing to plan it out for me. Besides, the companies were pretty reputable and based in the local area, so I wasn't going to be assigned to the sticks out of the blue. It was a great deal.

"I can't have Chifuyu take care of me forever..."

My parents weren't around for me anymore. My older sister was kind enough to take care of me, but I'd been developing an inferiority complex about it for a while. Thankfully, Chifuyu earned a fair amount of dough, so we weren't poor, but I still wasn't comfortable with it. Originally, I wanted to start working straight away after middle school, but my sister overpowered me... physically... and I had to take the exams. Anyway, if I managed to get into Aietsu Academy, then my career was as good as assured, and I figured Chifuyu would have an easier time, too. Well, it's not like she was saying she wanted an easier time— I wanted to do that.

"I can think about the rest when I've passed."

I'd studied hard for a year and gotten an A in the mock tests, so I wasn't particularly worried. Unless something crazy happened, I was sure to pass. The real exam was to be held at some multipurpose hall, built with taxpayer money. I only knew it by name. I found it was kind of odd that a private school had access to a public facility, but I figured they had connections. You know, backroom deals and stuff.

"Um... So how do I get to the second floor?"

I'd gotten lost. It was a damn complicated building, in all honesty. Apparently the designer was sourced locally, as were the builders. Overall, a municipal affair.

"What the hell is with this stupid artsy layout? Where the hell is the goddamn staircase?!"

If someone had told me that I had wandered into a maze, I would have believed them. I couldn't understand why the floor plan was so hard to understand. There was a huge glass corridor that would be impossible to air condition, a wall covered in tiles that would fall on people's heads in an earthquake, and weird lights embedded into the ceiling that would run up a huge electricity bill. How did they even swap them out? None of it made any sense.

"....."

In my last year of middle school and I got lost. How pathetic am I...

“Right. I’m gonna open the next door I see. That usually works out just fine.”

—*Excellent, a door. Coming in...*

“Oh, hello. You must be here to take the test. You can change over there. We’re short on time, so please make it quick. We only have the building until four. I have no idea what management was thinking making such a tight schedule...”

A nervous, 30-something-year-old teacher talked to me the instant I entered the room. Maybe she was busy, or maybe her attention was dulled... Possibly both... But she never actually looked at me. Did I really have to change for the test? I figured it must have been a cheating countermeasure. The schools were having a rough time, it seemed.

I drew the curtain aside and found something truly magical. If I had to describe it, it looked like a medieval suit of armor, stored in a castle somewhere. It knelt in front of me like a knight swearing fealty. Strictly speaking, it didn’t look exactly like a suit of armor, and other people probably had a different view of it. My point was more that it looked kind of like it. It was roughly humanoid, and waiting to be used by its wearer.



I knew what it was: It was an IS.

That abbreviation stood for “Infinite Stratos,” a sort of transforming exoskeleton that had been developed with outer space in mind. The designers didn’t get their wish, and instead this high-performance piece of engineering was used as a weapon, and eventually, in sports. It was a flying, powered exoskeleton. Sadly, the IS technology had a critical flaw, which meant that I had no interest in it.

“Men can’t use it, huh...”

Yes. Only women could use it. The suits didn’t respond to anyone except girls. The armor in front of me was all but useless to me. I couldn’t do anything with it. Nothing at all.

I touched it.

“.....?!”

Immediately, a metallic sound rang through my mind.

The next moment, a wave of information flooded directly into my mind. Basic IS movement instructions I hadn’t even heard of: guides, specs, abilities, current loadout, remaining power supply, action radius, sensor accuracy, radar response, remaining armor, power output... Suddenly I understood everything, as if I had trained with it for years and years. Its sensors were linked to my visual cortex, transmitting the information into my eye and representing the world around me with numbers and values.

“Wh-What the...”

It moved. The IS damn well moved. It felt like moving my own hands and legs.

I felt something spread over me like my own skin... The skin barrier had opened.

A sense of weightlessness in my body... The thrusters were operational.

I felt a weight in my right hand. The close-combat blade materialized in a blaze of light.

My perception was heightened, clear... The hypersensors had optimized.

I understood all of this information. I’d never learned any of it, but I understood. And the world as the IS relayed it to me looked like...

“.....”

—*Um... Where was I, again?*

It was the day of the entrance ceremony, and I was now in high school, first year. I was in the middle of my introduction. In front of me were 29 girls. Behind me was Ms. Yamada, probably on the verge of tears. By the way, her name, “Ya-ma-da-Ma-ya,” could be read front to back or back to front in Japanese. It was a good name. Easy to remember. I digress.

I still hadn’t finished my introduction, it seemed. All the girls were looking at me with eyes that demanded more information. Wasn’t Houki going to help me on account of being childhood friends? No, she looked

away again. The cold broad. Was this our beautiful reunion? I guess it really wasn't.

—*No, no. If I don't talk now, they'll brand me a gloomy dude.*

I took a deep breath. And another. And then I opened my mouth.

"That is all."

Ta-da! The girls were disappointed. What were they expecting? Crazy girls...

"U-Um..." spoke someone behind me; her voice was twice as teary now.

—*Huh? What? That hadn't been enough?*

Bam! Someone hit me on the head.

"Ouch..."

Pain, that spinal reflex, reminded me of something. That hit... The power, the angle, the swiftness... Everything reminded me painfully of someone I knew.

"....."

Slowly I turned around and saw a fit, tall woman in a black suit and skirt. Her arms were crossed, and she had a glare very reminiscent of a wolf's.

"Whoa! It's Guan Yu!"

Bam! Another hit.

It really hurt, by the way. It was a loud and audible smack, and all the girls jumped back a little.

"There's no hero from the three kingdoms here, you idiot."

Her voice was low. There was an imaginary gong thundering in my mind.



—*No, no. Wait, wait, wait.*

What was Chifuyu doing there? She was away for work except for maybe one or two days each month.

“Oh, Ms. Orimura. Is the meeting already over?”

“Yes, Yamada. Sorry that you had to greet the class,” she replied, tenderly.

Wow, she never talked that kindly with me.

—*Whatever happened to General Guan Yu? Had he ridden off on Red Hare to Liu Bei?*

“D-Don’t worry, I’m the vice homeroom teacher. I can do this!”

Her teary voice had disappeared, and vice homeroom teacher Yamada Maya was looking at the homeroom teacher warmly. She was blushing.

“Everyone, my name is Orimura Chifuyu. It’s my job to turn you greenhorns into useful pilots in a year. Listen to what I say, and remember it. If you can’t do something, I’ll help you until you can. My job is training you from the age of fifteen to sixteen. Hate me all you want, but listen to what I say. Got it?”

Things had gotten a lot more complicated. Yes, it was undoubtedly my sister Orimura Chifuyu. I expected gasps of fear in the classroom, but instead I got shrill cries of happiness.

“Kyaa! Chifuyu! It’s really Chifuyu!”

“I’m a long-time fan of yours!”

“I enrolled here because of you! I came all the way from Kita-Kyuushuu!”

—*Who cares even if you’re from southern Hokkaido?*

“I’m so happy you’ll be giving me orders, Chifuyu!”

“I’ll die for you!”

“Every year we get all these fools. It’s impressive, really. Or are they assigning me all the fools?” said Chifuyu, while giving the ecstatic girls an annoyed look.

She wasn’t acting. She really was uncomfortable.

—*Chifuyu, my sister... You can’t buy popularity. Be nicer to them...*

But I was wrong. More wrong than the people who thought the Earth was flat ages ago— although they thought it was round in the Middle Ages. More wrong than the guys who wanted to fly on wings of feathers and wax—which was just stupid, honestly. More wrong than someone trying to cross the Atlantic in a raft... Actually, I guess someone did that. Anyway...

“Hahh! Chifuyu! Scold me! Abuse me!”

“But be nice sometimes!”

“Discipline me so I don’t get spoiled!”

I was glad that all my classmates were so energetic. Well, I was also confused that my sister Chifuyu was my homeroom teacher... Or I would have been, but all the constant screeching of the girls had calmed me down. There is something about seeing someone’s outrageously emotional reaction

which lets us work more rationally than before; I realized the truth of that first-hand.

“So? Are you going to introduce yourself properly?”

The edge in her voice... Edge, as in the sense of strictness. That was how she spoke with me.

“But, Sister, I—”

Bam! The third strike of the day.

—*Did you know, Chifuyu? About 5,000 brain cells die when you hit someone on the head.*

“That’s Ms. Orimura to you.”

“Yes... Ms. Orimura.”

That exchange did not bode well. Now the class knew that I was her brother.

“Really? That guy is her brother?”

“Do you think that has something to do with him being the only man in the world who can pilot an IS?”

“Ahh, that must be nice... I wish I could be him...”

Let’s ignore the last girl. I need to get something out of the way. I was in the IS Academy, being the only man in the world who could use the IS.

The IS Academy... is to teach its students how to pilot the IS, with funding and management provided by the Japanese government. Due to all research being shared with all treaty nations, the Japanese government is to refrain from maintaining a veil of secrecy. Additionally, any and all related controversies are to be solved by the Japanese government to the satisfaction of the treaty nations. Furthermore, any and all prospective students from a treaty nation are to be allowed enrollment to the academy, unconditionally, and provided housing by the Japanese government. —IS Operations Treaty, Section: IS Pilot Educational Institution (Excerpt)

That was the kind of school it was. The long and short of it was basically: “The world’s gone crazy ’cause of the IS you stupid Japanese built, so you better make a school and train our people there. Oh, and hand over the tech. The bill is yours. Bye.” That country that starts with “A” is basically the mafia.

As for “why” I ended up at the IS Academy, well, I managed to control the test unit they were using to review prospective students... But the question of “how” I even ended up there in the first place... Well, Aietsu and IS sound pretty similar, right? Let’s leave it at that.

“.....”

I felt a cold glare from the chaotic classroom. I looked around; Houki had turned back from looking out the window and was staring at me.

—*Why is she so angry now? What did I do?*

I decided I’d ask her later.

The bell rang.

“Okay, the short homeroom is over. You’ll have to learn all the IS fundamentals in half a month. After that, training begins. Basic movements will take you another two weeks. Got that? Sound off if you do, and even if you don’t. I want to hear you.”

Wow, what a tyrannical teacher. She was a demon in my sister’s skin. No, a demon would have been more flexible; they’re not human, after all. The human in front of me was so nasty because she had an idea of the limitations of human beings. You see, Orimura Chifuyu was the former Japanese first-gen IS pilot. She was unbeaten in official competitions. One day, she retired and disappeared— or rather, she became a teacher, which she apparently hid from even me, her family. I shouldn’t have worried about her.

“Sit down, fool.”

—*Okay, the fool will sit.*



“Oh...”

—*Damn. This is bad. Really bad. I yield.*

“.....”

The first period was “Basics of IS Theory,” and when it ended, we had a break. However, the weird atmosphere in the classroom made it hard to do anything. The IS Academy had regular classes right off the bat so they could drill IS knowledge into us until we almost passed out. Need an orientation? “Look at the map,” they said.

I wasn’t sure if there even was a resolution to my situation. Again, everyone was a girl, and it wasn’t just my class. The whole school was like that. And since the news that I was the only man who could pilot an IS went around the world, there wasn’t a single person in there who didn’t know about me. Outside, the hallway was packed with second- and third-year students. Nobody really talked to me, though. Perhaps they were too used to being only around girls?

The girls in my class were the same. They all wanted me to talk to *them*, and were afraid their friends would talk to me. By the way, this was the only IS Academy in the world. There were a lot of other schools that had classes to prepare their students for it, though. And everyone in them was female. The girls clearly weren’t used to seeing a man, and besides, men were in a bad state in the world, anyway.

It was soon going to be 10 years after the IS was unveiled to the world. That was when everything changed. All the other war machines were just hunks of steel to an IS. It toppled the established military balance. Since a Japanese citizen had invented it, the Japanese then had a monopoly on IS technology. Foreign nations, in their fear, made the IS Usage Treaty, also called the Alaska Pact. This meant the release of all IS information, formed a supranational body for research and training, and outlawed military usage. So, now the number of IS pilots of a country represented how much military power it had, in cases of emergency self-defense and so on. And the

pilots were all girls... So all the countries immediately started giving girls preferential treatment.

The concept that “girls = powerful” had spread and conquered the world. Now, after 10 years, women held all the power over men. If a man appeared to challenge that, well, that would make them curious, wouldn’t it?

So there we were. I looked over at the girl next to me, and she blushed and looked away. I could tell she still wanted me to talk to her. When you think about it, they were all looking up to my sister Orimura Chifuyu, so that made it harder to talk to me as well.

—*Someone save me from this...*

I remember an old friend of mine, Gotanda. He’d said he was super jealous of me, but I couldn’t see why. If he could’ve taken my place, that’d have been perfect.

“Can I have a word with you?”

“Hm?”

Someone was talking to me. Had she won the knockout tournament among the girls regarding who got to talk to me? No, there was sudden unrest in the class. One of the girls had decided to make a move on her own.

“Houki?”

“.....”

My childhood friend from six years back was standing in front of me; Shinonono Houki. I used to take lessons at her family’s dojo. She wore a ponytail like she always had. The ponytail was long, going below the shoulder, and she’d bound it with a white ribbon. Probably white because her father was a priest— they ran both a dojo and a shrine.

She was of average height for a girl, but because of years of training with a sword, she seemed taller than she was. She always looked like she was in a bad mood, but that was genetic, or so I was told. I figured chances weren’t all that low that she hated me, though. Like, I wasn’t imagining it that she glared at me when I called her by her first name. Houki always looked kind of like a sword herself in my mind, but the years since I’d seen her had only made her sharper and harder, it seemed.



"Can we talk in the hallway?"

I guess she didn't want to talk in the classroom. Nonetheless, I was glad to get a chance to escape. Bless childhood friends.

—*Cold, my ass. Whoever said that should apologize. Guess that was me.*

"Get going."

"R-Right..."

Houki strode away into the hallway. The girls there opened a path for her, like Moses parting the sea. We were out in the hallway, but at about four meters in every direction were more girls. They were all listening to us. I could feel it. It was no different than talking in the classroom, if you asked me.

"So, by the way..."

"Yeah?"

I remembered something, and talked first. Houki hadn't talked to me after dragging me out into the hallway. Pretty wild.

"I heard you won the national kendo tournament last year. Congrats."

"....."

Houki turned red after I said that. Was she upset? Why the hell would she be? I was complimenting her.

"H-How do you know that?"

"I read it in the papers..."

"Why are you looking at the papers?!"

What was Houki talking about? I didn't get it. Let me read the damn papers. Oh, and I almost forgot to mention it, but she always talked a bit like a man, or a samurai.

"Oh, also."

"Y-Yes?!"

"....."

"No, never mind..."

Houki looked uncomfortable now. Maybe she was trying to glare less? At the same time she looked worked up, though. She was weird.

"It's been a while. Six years, right? But I knew it was you right away, Houki."

"Really..."

"You've got your hair the same."

I touched my own hair as an example. Houki touched her long ponytail.

"I-I'm surprised you remember."

"Hey, I wouldn't forget my childhood friend."

"....."

Whoops. Glaring at me again. What did I do now?

Ding-dong. Break had ended.

The bell rang to signal the beginning of the second period. The cordon of girls around me and Houki disintegrated. It looked like little spiders

scattering into every which direction. IS pilots were so swift in how they moved.

"Let's head back."

"I-I know we have to."

Houki averted her eyes and walked away at the same brisk pace.

My childhood friend had no intention of waiting for me, it seemed. Six years change people, don't they? As if. She'd always been like that. Stubbornness, daily training, steady progress... Those words suited Houki better than most boys, and had all the way since elementary school. Personally, I'd love it if she could be a bit more spontaneous, but...

"....."

She glared at me again. Maybe she read my mind? Houki had always been very attuned to when people were insulting her. But I wasn't even insulting her. That was just the story I went along with in my head.

Bam!

"Sit down, Orimura."

"Thank you for your guidance... Ms. Orimura..."

20,000 brain cells were lost before lunch.



"Thus, using an IS unit requires the approval of the country, and any violation thereof is a criminal offense," Ms. Yamada recited from the textbook.

She'd lost me a while before that.

"....."

There were five books on her table. She was leafing through the top one, rattling down vocab I didn't know.

—I-Is it just me? Anybody else? You guys understand this jargon? Active something, wide area-whatever... What's all that mean? Are we supposed to remember that?

I looked at the girl next to me... She was nodding as she took notes. I guess they'd had prep lessons before coming to the IS Academy.

IS pilots were the main line of national defense, so our school was rearing the best of the best. Only the very finest students passed the entrance exams. I didn't wanna be the elite... There was no way... I didn't wanna study. I hung my head, feeling inferior, and looked at the girls taking notes around me.

"C-Can I help you?"

Like I figured, she was nervous and surprised. She was also expecting more to come from me, and smiled.

"Oh, never mind. It's nothing. Sorry."

"O-Okay..."

She seemed to be disappointed and relieved at the same time, and returned to taking notes. I wondered if I'd done something to make her dislike me.

"Orimura, is there anything you don't understand?"

Ms. Yamada had, apparently, noticed me talking to the girl next to me.

"Um..."

I looked back down at my textbook. Yep, understood nothing.

"Please ask if there's anything you don't understand. I'm your teacher, after all!" Ms. Yamada proudly proclaimed, posturing upright.

—*Well, looks like I can depend on my teacher, so I may as well ask.*

"Hey, Teach!"

"Yes, Orimura!" she replied excitedly.

"I don't understand a single thing."

I decided to be upfront with it. Usually people were pretty accepting of it.

"Um... E-Everything?"

Ms. Yamada looked confused and startled. The respectable teacher act had disappeared.

"U-Um... Is anybody else having problems understanding it besides Orimura?"

Silence.

Well, that was weird. Nobody raised their hand. The fools. If you don't have the basics down, you'll have even more problems later. They really had no idea how school worked, did they?

"Orimura, did you read the textbooks I gave you before you entered here?" asked my sister Chifuyu, from the corner of the classroom.

—*Okay, let's be honest here...*

"I thought they were old phone directories, so I chucked them."

Bam!

"I wrote you saying they were required reading!"

Another 5,000 brain cells down the drain. The brain cell undertaker was really busy.

"I'll send you new ones. Learn what's in there in a week's time. Got it?"

"E-Erm, those were thick as hell. I can't learn all that in a week..."

"You will."

"Okay... I will."

She was worse than the drill sergeant from *Full Metal Jacket*. A human being in the shape of a demon, being human made her all the more cruel. She knew the best ways to make others suffer.

"The IS eclipses traditional weapons with maneuverability and power. Using that kind of power without understanding it invites disaster; it's imperative you understand what you're doing. Remember what the books say, even if you don't get it, and act accordingly. That's what rules are all about."

Yeah, sure. Just so we're clear, I wasn't in that situation because I wanted to be. One day, men in black suits showed up and left me with an application form for the IS Academy, whatever the hell that was about. They talked about protecting me or something, but does that really mean throwing me into a school full of girls? I wanted them to protect me from that instead— especially from my sister, Chifuyu.

"Right now you're thinking that you never wanted to be here, right?"

—*Well, yeah...*

"Whether we want to or not, human beings can only survive in a group. If you want to renounce that, try renouncing your humanity first."

She was always such a bitter person. I guess she was telling me to face reality. Chifuyu had always been a realist and an extremist. I knew why, though.

"....."

—*Hmm. Fine, then.*

I figured I'd at least have to make sure my sister Chifuyu wouldn't be embarrassed at her workplace. I had to do it for her, seeing as how our parents were no longer around.

"U-Um... Orimura. I'll teach you the things you don't understand after school, okay? All right?"

Ms. Yamada came up to me defensively. She was smaller than me, so she had to look up.

"Okay. I'll come visit you after school."

I took my seat again. Chifuyu also returned to the corner of the classroom.

"I-I'll be alone with a student after school... Oh, no! Th-This is bad, Orimura. I go along with everything when I'm pressured... And I've never been with a man before..."

She was beginning to turn red, and rambled on. Was Ms. Yamada really going to be okay? IS pilots couldn't handle men at all, could they? The gazes of the other girls were painful. If their looks could physically harm me, I would have turned into Swiss cheese.

"B-But you're also Ms. Orimura's brother..."

"Um... Ms. Yamada, please continue the lesson."

"O-Okay!"

Eventually, my sister called Ms. Yamada back from her reverie. Ms. Yamada rushed back to the front, stumbled, and fell.

"Uhh... Ouchies."

—*What an insecure klutz we have as a teacher.*

I felt like our classes were going to be a bit of a problem.

"Do you have a moment?"

"Huh?"

I thought the class atmosphere was going to be awkward again during the break after second period, but instead a girl had come up to talk to me. I reacted nervously. She was beautiful, with natural blonde hair. She looked

at me with clear blue eyes, the kind that only white people had. Her hair was curly, and she gave off the impression of someone of high birth who had already found her place in society.

Due to the IS, women received much better treatment than men in the world; to say it was favorable would be an understatement. Women just had all the power, and men were brought to be slaves, and for manual labor. It wasn't rare to see men in town being made to do things by random women they ran into. The girl in front of me was just like that. She had her hands on her hips, demonstrating to me who she thought was in charge. The IS Academy had to allow foreign nationals to enter unconditionally, so seeing foreign girls wasn't rare. Perhaps only half my class was actually Japanese, if even that many.

"Are you listening? What is your answer?"

"Oh, uh... I'm listening. What do you want?" I answered.

"Goodness! What sort of response is that? Don't you believe you should address me in a way that reflects the honor I bestow upon talking to you?" she replied, having raised her voice.

"....."

Man, I hated their type. They could use the IS, and were a country's military strength. IS pilots had all the power, and IS pilots were always girls. That didn't give them the right to lord it over us, did it? It was basically violence against men.

"Sorry, but that name's not ringing any bells."

I had no clue. She had probably introduced herself at some point, but I didn't remember it. I'd been too shocked that Chifuyu was my homeroom teacher. The girl in front of me was shocked by this. Well, maybe she should've just told me her stupid name. She narrowed her eyes and continued to belittle me.

"You don't know me? Me, Cecilia Alcott? I'm the British National Cadet, and the one who took first place in the entrance exams!"

Oh, so her name was Cecilia. Interesting.

"Hey, can I ask a question?"

"Hmph. Enlightening the rabble is part of the duties of nobility. Go on, then."

"What's a National Cadet?"

Dadum. Some of the girls in the classroom who had been listening were agitated now.

"A... A... A..."

"Ah?"

"Are you really asking that?!"

She glared at me menacingly. In a manga, the artist would have drawn her rage veins.

"Yeah. I have no idea what that is."

My curiosity was genuinely piqued. Vanity wasn't good for anyone.

"....."

Cecilia's rage calmed down. She put a finger on her temple and began to mumble.

"Unbelievable. Utterly unbelievable. The island nations of the far east are truly a land of savages. This is common knowledge, you plebeian. Have you no television?"

Excuse me. We had television. Not that I watched it.

"Let's say I don't. So, what's a National Cadet then?" I asked.

"An elite student picked as their country's IS pilot. You should be able to understand as much from the word itself."

"I guess so."

I suppose it was easy to make fun of me for making a silly mistake.

"Yes! The elite!"

Back to business for her. Truly, the elite National Cadet.

She pointed her finger at me. It was so close that it almost touched my nose.

"Ordinarily it would be a miracle if someone exceptional, like myself, would share a class with you. Appreciate your luck. I recommend being a little more aware of it."

"Right. Lucky me, eh?"

"Are you making fun of me?"

—*You're the one who brought up luck in the first place...*

"I'm stunned that you were able to enter this school despite knowing nothing about the IS. I heard that you are the only man able to pilot the IS, so I expected a little more knowledge from you... But I was disappointed."

"It's best not to expect anything from me."

"Hmph. On the other hand, I am a person of vast magnanimity. I will treat you properly."

How very... "magnanimous" of you. Never met anyone half as good in my 15 years on this Earth.

"If you don't understand something about the IS, well... Cry to me that you need help and I might just help you. I am, after all, the elite of the elite who managed to beat a teacher during the entrance exam. The *only* one."

—*The only one...? Wait a sec.*

"Entrance exam? Like, the one where you move the IS and fight and stuff?"

"There is no other, is there?"

"Hm... Pretty sure I beat the teacher, too."

"You what?"

I really had. Well, she'd come barging in, I'd dodged her, and she had knocked herself out flying into a wall. Nothing more. Still, what I'd said was apparently a shock for Cecilia. Her eyes opened in shock.

"I-I was told that I was the only one..."

"The only girl, right? There is a slight distinction."

Gotcha!

I could swear I heard something... weird. It sounded like icicles fracturing.

"S-So... I'm not the only one?"

"Beats me."

"You? You beat a teacher?!"

"Apparently, anyway."

"Apparently?! What does that mean?!" she protested.

"Hey, calm down. All right?"

"H-How am I supposed to calm d—"

Ding-dong.

The beginning of third period interrupted our discussion. It was a blessing, frankly.

"I shall return! Don't run away from me! Got it?"

—*No...*

But I didn't say that out loud because I didn't want her to be mad at me.

"I will explain the different aspects of the equipment you'll be using in training now."

Unlike the first and second period, my sister Chifuyu led the class instead of Ms. Yamada. But Ms. Yamada was still around carrying a notebook, it seemed.

"Oh, but first we need to select a representative for the class league match the week after next," Chifuyu said, offhandedly.

—*Class league match? Representative?*

"The class representative is just that. They won't just participate in the league match, but also on the student council, as well as committee meetings. They're the class president. The class league match determines the various levels in competence between the different classes. Right now there won't be much difference, but competition engenders improvement. It's only going to take place once, then the ranking is fixed."

The girls began to talk among themselves. I had no idea what was going on, and just sat there. I figured we were talking, ostensibly, about electing a class rep. It was probably kind of a pain in the butt. Bless the one who ended up with this chore.

"Well then, I suggest Orimura."

—*Hm? Did my class have more than one Orimura? How funny.*

"Yeah, I agree."

—*Wow. I don't care who turns into the class rep, as long as it isn't me.*

"Then the first candidate will be Orimura Ichika. Any others? No self-recommendation."

—*Oh, wow. There was apparently another dude called Orimura Ichika.*

"M-Me?!"

I stood up. Everyone stared. I knew without turning around that everyone was looking at me, hoping I would solve all their troubles.

"Orimura, sit down. You're disturbing class. Any others? If not, then we don't even have to vote on this."

"H-Hold on! I'm not going to do—"

"No self-recommendation. If they recommend you, you can't refuse it. Get ready to do your job."

"N-No, I—"

I was trying to argue against this development when I was cut off by a shrill voice.

"Please wait! I cannot agree to this!"

Cecilia had slammed her table and stood up. Bless my popularity. Getting along with people was important.

"What is this farce of an election? Do you want to disgrace this class by having a male representative? I, Cecilia Alcott, will not abide this humiliation for an entire year!"

—Yes, tell them how wrong they are about... Huh?

"If ability is what counts for class representative, then I should be the natural choice. I will not accept this Far Eastern monkey as my representative just because he's a rarity. I came to this island nation to study the IS and train, not to participate in a circus sham!"

Wow, I wasn't even human anymore. And besides, wasn't Britain an island as well? It wasn't that different from Japan.

"The most able fighter should be the class representative, and that is clearly me!"

Her rage did not subside; if anything, she was getting more and more worked up. I didn't want to be the rep, but this was starting to piss me off.

"Besides, having to live in this pre-modern country is already seriously offensive to me, and—"

—The hell?

"And what are you so proud of in Britain? You've had the world's worst food for years," I blurted out.

"Wha—"

More like that slipped out. I looked back, hesitantly, and saw Cecilia red with rage. Wow. I'd done it.

"Y-You! How dare you insult my motherland!"

Oh, well. It was too late to take prisoners. No use crying over spilt milk. The rock was rolling down the hill.

"I challenge you to a duel!"

Cecilia slammed her hand on the table. I wondered if she would throw a gauntlet at me? She wasn't wearing one. I think doing that was Italian, anyway.

"Fine. You're on. That beats all this talking, for sure."

"Just so you know, if you lose on purpose, I will make you my maid... No, my slave."

"Oh, you'll see. I'm not going to go easy on you."

"All right. Perfect. This will be your chance to witness the abilities of the British National Cadet, Cecilia Alcott!"

I'd gone with the flow and now I had to battle her, apparently. As a man, I didn't think it was quite right for me to use all my strength against a girl, though.

"What kind of handicap do you think is okay?" I asked.

"Oh, are you already begging?"

"No, I just want to know how much of a handicap you want."

Suddenly, the entire class started laughing.

"O-Orimura, are you serious?"

"Men aren't stronger than women anymore. That was ages ago."

"Orimura, maybe you can use an IS, but you're living in the past."

They were all laughing. Well, I guess they were right; men were way weaker than women. Physical strength was useless. Maybe not all girls could pilot an IS, but the only ones with the potential for it were girls. Men couldn't pilot them on principle. If a war erupted on gender lines, then the male military wouldn't last three days. Maybe not even three hours. The IS outclassed all forms of conventional weaponry.

"Okay, no handicap then."

"Yes, yes. Of course. If anything, why, it should be I who gives you a handicap. Fufu. A man, stronger than a woman? Japanese men have a sense of humor!" she responded smugly; her rage had all but evaporated.

"Hey, Orimura. It's not too late. You can still ask Cecilia to give you a handicap," said a friendly girl from behind me.

However, I could see she was suppressing a smile. She was messing with me, which furthered my annoyance.

"No, I suggested this. I don't need a handicap."

"You're not taking a National Cadet seriously enough... Or maybe you don't know."

"....."

Well, I'd never seen an IS battle in person. All I'd seen was some old footage from when my sister Chifuyu had fought.

"Looks like we have a conclusion. The battle will be next Monday. Third arena, after school. Orimura, Alcott: make your preparations until then. We will begin the lesson now."

Chifuyu clapped her hands once to end the discussion.

I said nothing and sat down. I wasn't sure what to feel about the situation. I could master the basics in a week, so it wouldn't be all that hard, anyway. It moved right away during the entrance exam. It wasn't rocket science. On the other hand, if this worked out, I was the class rep. I really didn't want that, but that's how the cards were laid. Can't squirt the milk back up the udder.

—*Okay, I should listen to the class.*

I opened the textbook in front of me.



“Ugh...”

I had basically collapsed over my desk after school.

“I-I don’t get it... Why is there so much dumb stuff...?”

The first problem was all the lingo. You had to have a dictionary in order to keep up, but there was no IS dictionary, so I hadn’t kept up all day. Speaking of which, the general situation with the girls didn’t change after school. They came over, even from other classes, and talked among themselves in hushed voices.

—*Gimme a break already...*

It’d been hell during lunch break already. The whole crowd of girls had followed me to the cafeteria, like the procession of some king, and in the cafeteria nobody had sat next to me, of course— I was like Gulliver. I was like some strange animal the Japanese had never seen. I once heard that axolotls were popular as exotic animals from overseas once, but I had no idea what they looked like, for example.

“Oh, Orimura. You’re still in the classroom. Good.”

“Huh?”

I looked up and saw my vice homeroom teacher, Ms. Yamada, with a textbook in hand. Not that it matters, but she really looked so small. In reality, she was probably of average height.

“Um... We have a room for you in the dorms now,” she said, while handing me a piece of paper with my room number on it and a key.

All students of the IS Academy lived in the dorms. It was more out of obligation than anything else. Supposedly, the reason for it was to be quick in response to protect the future IS pilots. I mean, the national defense was on the line. Other countries were probably trying to recruit students away from the academy, too. Actually, I knew that they were, all the time.

“I thought I didn’t have one yet? They told me I’d be commuting from home for a week.”

“Well, things have changed. We’ve made certain arrangements with the room allocations to make this possible.” Then she leaned close to my ear and said, “Orimura, did the government tell you that?”

The government was, of course, the Japanese government. After all, I was the only male IS pilot; they wanted to keep me safe and under surveillance or something. At one point, my name was all over the news. The media, ambassadors, and eventually even genetic research institutes, all showed up on my doorstep wanting to research me, or something. As if I would have agreed to this under normal circumstances.

“After all the chaos, they wanted to put you in to the dorm as fast as possible. In a month or so you will have your own room, but for the time being, you will have to share one.”

“Um, Ms. Yamada... You’re breathing into my ear.”

Why was she still whispering, anyway? Everyone in the classroom was giving us curious looks.

“Oh, I... Um... I didn’t do that on purpose!”

"I know that, but... Anyway, since I won't be going home again, can I leave early and gather my belongings so I can move?"

"Oh, that won't be—"

"I took care of it. Thank me later," Chifuyu butted in.

"Darth Vader's Theme" was thundering through my head when she appeared. Sometimes, "Terminator's Theme" played instead.

"Th-Thank you so much..." I muttered.

"I only got you the bare necessities for life: a change of clothes and your phone charger."

Wow, that was the barest of the bare. I mean, that was necessary for life, but man, people could use a bit of luxury, too.

"It says on the paper when you can go there. Dinner is from six to seven in the first year cafeteria. Every room has a shower, but we have a large bath as well. The different grades have different times for the bath... But, you can't use it for the time being, Orimura."

"Why not? Who doesn't like a good bath?" I inquired.

"Are you stupid? Or do you want to bathe together with girls your age?"

"Oh..."

Right. Everyone else was a girl.

"Y-You want to go into the bath with girls?! N-No! You can't!" cried Ms. Yamada.

"I-I'm not saying I want to..."

Who knows what they'd do to me? It wasn't a good idea either way, ethically speaking.

"What? You're not interested in girls? Th-That's not good either..."

—*Man, this woman never really listens to people, does she?*

While Ms. Yamada and I were engaged in this game of telephone, the girls out in the corridor started whispering and spreading rumors.

"Maybe Orimura only likes men?"

"That... Might be nice too."

"Find out which people he knew in middle school! I want all his friends by the day after tomorrow!"

—*Why is this happening?*

"Um, we have a meeting now, so... You have to go to the dorms afterwards, Orimura. Don't loaf around on the way."

It was, like, 50 meters to the dorms. There was no way to loaf around somewhere. I mean, there were club rooms, the IS arena, IS maintenance facilities, development facilities and other buildings on campus, but that had nothing to do with me yet. Eventually I'd have to check it all out, but I just wanted to get some rest, and to be free of the girls looking at me all the time.

"Hmm..."

Chifuyu looked after Ms. Yamada as she left the room and followed her.

What a day. There was still a lot of talking in the classroom, but I decided that enough was enough and went to find my dorm room. Anything

was better than staying there.

"Hmm... Should be here. Room 1025."

I checked the room number again and used the key. It was unlocked.

Ka-chick.

The first thing I saw was a large bed. Two of them, actually. They looked pretty comfortable, certainly much better than some hotels. I could feel the softness just from looking at it. It was way better than anything I was used to— bless the tax money. I put my belongings down and jumped onto the bed; it was really soft. A great bed, down-filled.

"Is someone there?"

I heard a voice from another room. I figured there was a door between us. The voice was kind of unclear. I remembered that they'd told me there was a shower.

"Oh, you must be living here now, too. Let's get along together, shall we?"

A bad feeling suddenly crept up my spine.

"Sorry that I'm looking like this. I was in the shower. I'm Shinonono..... Houki....."

Out of the shower room came my childhood friend Houki, with whom I was just barely reunited. She had been using the shower, directly adjacent from the beds, and she was coming out of it. Houki apparently thought that her roommate would be a girl, so she was only wearing a single bath towel. Oh... And no ponytail.

The size of the white towel was quite small, and I could see most of her beautiful thighs. Drops of water were still running down her legs, which proved her usage of the shower. Her skin was clear and white. Even with the towel on I could tell that her slender upper body was well-trained, but not in a bad way; the training only emphasized her feminine lines. Her hand was pressing the towel into her respectable breasts. The last time I had seen her body was during swimming in fourth grade. Of course that had left no impression. Houki definitely had bigger breasts than she let on in her uniform. All that went through my mind in 0.3 seconds.

"....."

She stared at me in puzzlement. I stared back in puzzlement. The great battle of the puzzled; only one of us was going to win.

"I-I-Ichika?"

"H-Hey..." I nodded, as Houki became very pink.

I couldn't blame her; she'd come out of the shower to find a man in her room. I wasn't sure what to do either.

"Wha...?! D-Don't look at me!"

"I-I'm sorry!"

I looked away immediately. At a glance, I could see that Houki was pressing the towel into herself, desperately trying to hide or protect her

body. This accentuated the size of her breasts, and my heart began to beat faster.

"Wh-Wh-Why are you here?" Houki stuttered, uncomfortably.

"They put me into this room, too."

Then, everything happened in an instant. Lightning speed. She was as fast as you'd expect the national kendo champion to be. Houki grabbed a wooden sword from the wall and raised it above her head to strike. She quickly closed the distance between us.

—I'm gonna die!

"Whoa!"

I jumped down from the bed and ran for the door. **Zoom.** I made it outside the door by the skin of my teeth. I slammed the door shut with my back and felt the reassuring protection of it.

"I'm saf—"

Wham!

The tip of the wooden sword pierced the door and protruded out slightly. And it was a wooden door at that; piercing it with a wooden sword was just incredible.

Zzzp.

The tip of the wooden sword retreated back into the room. She'd given up, apparently.

Bam!

"Hey, are you trying to kill me?! If I miss a dodge once, I'm dead meat!"

The tip was at the spot where my head had been mere moments before.

"What's going on?"

"Oh, it's Orimura."

"Ah, that must be your room, Orimura! Nice intel!"

Girls emerged from the rooms around me. All of them were wearing fluffy, pajama-like casual wear that was absolutely not designed to be seen by men. Some of them were only wearing long sweaters with neither a skirt nor pants underneath. A white triangle could be seen peeking out from underneath. Others were wearing a thin shirt with nothing else. Scantly clad girls were in all directions.

—Do girls really take off their underwear at every opportunity?

That seemed a little risky to me.

"Hey, Houki! Houki! Let me in! Come on! This is an emergency. I'll apologize, okay? Please, please just let me in..." I said, prostrated on the floor in front of the door.

—Open the door, o my savior.

"....."

There was only silence inside. At least the sword tip disappeared. I prayed there wouldn't be a third stab attempt.

Dadum.

There was a long pause. Perhaps two or three minutes long, but it felt like an hour or more.

Creeeak.

"Come in."

"O-Okay..."

Houki had opened the door in her kendo clothes. This must have been what she could put on the fastest. The belt was tied carelessly. She must have been in a hurry. Either way, I went inside.

—*Wait a minute. Something's off here.*

"What?"

Gulp. She was staring at me.

—*Sorry, nothing weird here at all!*

Houki sat down on the bed.

"....."

She frowned at me and tied her wet hair into a ponytail. She looked like herself again now. In terms of looks, at least.

"Are you really my roommate?"

"Y-Yeah. Looks like it."

She was staring at me again. I wouldn't have been surprised if her look could cut bamboo. *Slash, slash.*

"What's the meaning of this?"

"Huh?"

"I said, what's the meaning of this?! Girls and boys don't share a bedroom past seven! It's common knowledge!"

In the middle ages, sure. Then again, I also thought that 15-year-olds of the opposite sex shouldn't be living together... Let alone sharing a room.

"D-D-Di..."

"Dee?"

"Did you request this? Being in my room?"

"Don't be ridiculous."

I always seemed to pick the dangerous option. I didn't think I had, though. My response had disappointed her, otherwise the wooden sword wouldn't have come flying at me.

"C-Careful!"

Close. Too close. I barely managed to catch the sword in-between my hands, which really hurt, because it was made of wood. The impact wasn't going to kill me, though.

"Ridiculous? Ridiculous?! Blasphemy."

Whoa, she looked really scary. Terrifying, even. Maybe "childhood friend" was actually the codename of some kind of assassin in a secretive organization? Houki was still putting pressure on the sword caught between my hands; the situation was real bad. It wasn't a real sword, so it wouldn't actually cut me, but it could still knock me out well enough. Perhaps it might even break my skull? Probably not.

"....."

No, I take that back. I looked at the demon in front of me and knew that, even with a wooden sword, she could split me in two. Houki leaned down

more and more, which increased the pressure to her sword until it collapsed, and she was suddenly on top of me.

"Whoa, Shinonono... So daring..."

"Don't beat us to the punch..."

"We could share Orimura."

Share? Share what? At least five girls were peeking in through the open door, but there were probably more out in the hallway.

"Wh-Wha..."

Houki jumped away from me immediately. Bless the lifesavers.

"Oh? Are you done already?"

"That was looking real steamy."

Wow. High school girls these days were looking at the scene of an attempted murder thinking it "looked steamy." I had to remember that. I resolved to send a text to Gotanda about it later.

".....!"

Houki chased the girls away without saying anything and locked the door. I suspected the scene of an attempted murder was going to lose the "attempted" part. She had to keep people from interfering, but what about her alibi? Wait. Maybe I was just too dumb to understand her master plan? She might have a really good one. Horrible. This was how people got killed. The world had gone to the dogs.

"Ichika..."

"Yes?"

I was free of all earthly attachments. My soul was free. Free like a bird.

"Why are you looking like that?"

"Hm?"

I wasn't making any particular face.

"Whatever. We need to talk about this situation."

Oh, she was debating how best to dispose of me.

—Listen, Houki. It doesn't end with killing someone. There's still a lot to be done afterwards. A corpse is 50 kilograms or more of protein and fat, not to mention the five-plus liters of blood. And let's not forget about the bones. Bones begin to rot at an alarming speed. Everyone forgets that, right? But it's pretty tough. It takes way too long to dispose of the bones individually after you've dismembered someone. That's where the fridge comes in. In the fridge you...

"Are you listening, Ichika?"

"Wh-What? I'm not listening!"

"Who admits to that, you idiot?" Houki sighed.

Did I make a mistake again? I felt really guilty. Everything was so uncomfortable. Still, a man doesn't run away.

"S-Sorry. Can you repeat that?"

I bowed in apology. It was the law of the world. Even if you weren't sorry, if the other person was angry, you needed to apologize. That usually fixed it.

"L-Like I was saying. We need rules if we're going to live here. Um... L-Lines that can't be crossed, all right?" Houki mumbled, practically inaudible.

Why did she look so uncomfortable, anyway? Her cheeks were so pink. Was she sick?

"F-First we need to talk about the shower time. I need the shower from seven to eight. You can have it from eight to nine."

"Eh? But I want it first."

"A-Are you telling me to stay sweaty for an hour after my club?"

"Club? Your kendo club?"

"Y-Yes."

"Don't they have showers there?"

"I-I need my own shower or it freaks me out!"

—*Well, fine. I guess any sane person prefers their own bathroom over the school's.*

"Wait a minute. We don't have our own toilet, do we?"

"We don't, but there are two on each floor at the ends of the hallways."

"Is there... a toilet for the men?"

I had a vague suspicion. Like, the IS Academy have always had only girls in attendance, so why would they have needed toilets for men?

"....."

"Erm, uh... So what do I do now?"

"H-How should I know?! Ask the teachers!"

"So then if push comes to shove, do I have to use the girls' toilet?"

I felt her murderous stare, and pulled back. Houki reached for the wooden sword again and pointed it at my throat. I knew then and there that demons walked among us.

"Y-You developed some perverted tastes while we were apart! I'm disappointed!"

"What? Why, Houki?!"

"Because you want to go into the girls' toilet! I should punish you here and now!"

"Like hell you will!"

I saw a bamboo sword among the luggage sitting in a corner; it was probably Houki's, sticking out of her traveling bag.

—*People always tell you to put it into a case, Houki...*

It was probably going to break if I used it to block a wooden sword, but it was better than nothing to sit out her rage. I grabbed the bamboo sword and pulled it out of her bag.

—*It got stuck on something. Let's yank it.*

Zzzmm.

"Nooo!"

I pulled the bamboo sword all the way out and went into a defensive stance, facing Houki.

"Huh?"

Houki's mouth was twitching without moving or speaking. She looked as if she had seen a ghost.

"Huh? What is that?"

There was something hanging off the bamboo sword. It looked kind of like two triangles connected at the corners.

"G-Give that back!"

She snatched it away. The wooden sword now laid abandoned on the bed. Even more things were stuck to the bamboo sword, and Houki snatched that away as well, and hid it.

"....."

She was glaring at me with her face beet red. Probably a cold. Oh! I connected the dots. I knew what I'd seen now. Yes, indeed...

"Houki."

"Wh-What?"

Houki was using both her hands to shield those things from view, unable to attack. She was at a wary distance from me. I looked at her hands and saw white, pink, and light blue between her fingers.

"Oh, so you're wearing a bra now."

"Nnnngh!!"

Bam!

My head rang with pain.

Chapter II: The Battle for Class Rep!

"Hey..."

"....."

"Hey, are you still angry at me?"

"I'm not angry," said Houki, curtly.

"You look angry to me."

"I always look like this."

It was the second day of school, eight in the morning. We were eating in the cafeteria for the first years, and girls surrounded me in all directions. It scared me that even all the employees were women, but I shouldn't have been surprised. I was eating breakfast together with Houki in the interest of maintaining positive relations with my roommate, but we hadn't been able to talk properly since the day before. I had a Japanese breakfast, incidentally; there was rice, natto, sliced salmon, miso soup, and also some vegetables as a side dish. I was basically eating tax money, and it was pretty good. Bless the power of the state.

Houki was eating the same. Japanese people ate rice for breakfast, period. Not that bread was bad, but... salmon was just too good to pass up. It had a faint but pleasant trace of salt, and the rice was soft and warm. Sheer excellence! Generic electric rice cookers had nothing on this.

"Houki, this is really good."

"....."

She was ignoring me. Still, she took a bite of the salmon, as if to acknowledge agreement.

I'd always lived together with my sister Chifuyu, so it wasn't like living alone with a girl made me a raving lunatic. I'd washed Chifuyu's clothes for a long time, in fact, so I wasn't going to freak out over some panties. That was only my side of the story, though. My childhood friend across the table was probably not seeing things quite like that. Maybe she hated how seeing her panties wasn't a big deal for me? I had no idea what was going through her mind.

"I told you that I'm not angry."

She brought that up herself, though. She hardly ever looked at me, and if our eyes met by accident, she'd look away. Well, if that wasn't being angry at me, then there was still hope for global peace.

"Hey, he's the boy they're all talking about."

"And he's the brother of Chifuyu as well!"

"Whoa, both brother and sister are IS pilots? Do you think he's good, too?"

Everything was just as it had been the day before. The girls around me were keeping their distance, but clearly paid attention only to me, barely containing their interest. It was irritating. If this had been a fishing

operation, it would've been a great catch. Pretty dumb metaphor if you ask me, but hey—

"So, Houki..."

"D-Don't use my name."

"Shinonono?"

"....."

I tried calling her by her last name, but that didn't seem to make her happy, either. Houki still didn't like her name, apparently. Well, there was a bit of a story behind that.

"O-Orimura, may we sit here?"

"Hm?"

I looked over and saw three girls, carrying breakfast trays and awaiting my answer.

"Yeah, sure."

The girl who had asked me sighed with relief and the others struck a victorious pose. I heard murmurs among the crowd around us.

"Oh, no... I should have talked to him..."

"It's... It's just the second day... There's no rush. Don't worry..."

"I heard they saw a girl on top of him yesterday."

"What?!"

Oh, yeah. The day before, 8 girls in first year, 15 in second year, and 21 in third year had come to introduce themselves. I had a tough time just remembering their names. If any of them had come up to me afterward and asked me if I remembered her name, chances would have been about 50-50. What more could you have expected?

It was first thing in the morning today, and I had to remember another three. This group of girls had, apparently, already made a deal with respect to who got to sit where, and they took up their positions very smoothly. It was a table for six. Houki and I were sitting by the window. They took three more. One was left, and I wanted it to stay empty.

"Wow, you can eat so much in the morning, Orimura."

"Yeah, boys can eat so much..."

"I don't eat a lot for dinner, so I eat more in the morning," I replied.

That was actually the truth. I had experimented for a number of years, but ultimately this turned out to be the best for me. Well... I was just imitating Chifuyu, if anything.

"Are you girls okay eating so little in the morning?"

The three girls who joined us all had different meals, but largely shared the same things: a slice of bread, a glass of juice, and a side dish... A small side dish at that.

"W-We'll be..."

"Um... Fine?"

How fuel-efficient. Maybe that was the reason only girls could pilot the IS?

"We eat a lot of sweets..."

—You'll get fat doing that.

It probably wasn't healthy. People had to take care of their body during their teenage years. I once read that you start to age faster as early as 22.

"Orimura, I'm going ahead."

"Hm? Oh. See you later."

Houki finished her food and left. All Houki had eaten was Japanese-style food from the buffet; the food of ancient Japan, just like a real samurai. She was the image of the ideal woman in the middle ages. Or maybe not, I dunno.

I hadn't expected my roommate to be Houki. I suppose it was definitely better than living with a girl I didn't know. Houki and I had known each other as kids; back in elementary school, Chifuyu had taken me to kendo, and I was in the same class with Houki until we were 10. Her parents often invited us for dinner since ours weren't around anymore. We were pretty poor, so that helped a lot. It wasn't like Houki and I were always friends, though. At first, we didn't get along at all, but as we practiced kendo together, we warmed to each other. I think, anyway— It was all kind of vague to me now. I'm sure I wasn't the only one who couldn't remember as well? Whatever. The past is the past, after all. There's no time like the present.

"Orimura, do you get along with Shinonono?"

"I-I heard you share a room?"

"Oh, yeah. We're childhood friends."

That itself didn't really mean much to me, but it caused a stir around me. A faint "What?!" could be heard off in the distance.

"S-So, uh..."

Ah, the girl next to me named... Tanimoto? Yeah, she was trying to ask me something, but a loud clap rang out in the cafeteria.

"How long are you going to stay here and eat? Finish your food efficiently. If you're late for class, I'll make you run ten laps."

My sister Chifuyu had appeared. Everyone in the cafeteria went back to eating their food.

A lap around the IS campus was five kilometers long. Having to run all of it was no joke. I finished my food as fast as possible as well.

Chifuyu was also the dorm mother, apparently. I really wanted to know whether she even slept. As her brother it worried me, but she was probably fine. If there was anyone capable of dealing with prolonged fatigue, it was her.

—Meanwhile, I can't even concentrate on all this IS stuff, even with a night's rest.

My battle with Cecilia was next week. I had to be able to pilot the IS with some degree of proficiency by then.

—It'll work out, I'm sure.

In the end, it did not.

Second period had ended and I was already groggy; it was only downhill from there. I'd studied the vocabulary, somewhat, and I was doing okay, but a lot of things just didn't make sense on a fundamental level. It was like a math question you just couldn't solve, the sort you need to know some formula for, but you don't remember it.

"I... What?"

In a way, this confused me even more. When I'd first touched the IS, it felt very natural, like I'd known it for many years. But when I read the textbooks, things made so little sense to me that I began to doubt that I had ever managed to move the unit in the first place. I crossed my arms and stared down at the book. It seemed to stare back as classes continued around me, during which Ms. Yamada steadily taught us, the students, the basics of the IS.

"So, since the IS was designed with outer space in mind, the pilot is completely enveloped by an energy barrier. The IS also supports the life functions of the body and stabilizes it at all times; this includes pulse, blood pressure, breathing, sweating, and endorphin production."

"Ms. Yamada, is that really okay? It sounds like it's messing with my body and I don't want that..." asked one of my classmates, looking a little disturbed.

I could definitely see how that sense of unity I'd felt when I connected to the IS might freak someone out.

"You're thinking about it too much. Let's see... You're all wearing a bra, right? It supports your body and has no negative effect to it. Of course, if you don't buy a bra that fits you, it doesn't work, but..."

Her eyes and mine met. Ms. Yamada fell silent for a moment. Some seconds passed, and then she turned red.

"I... Uh... Well... O-Orimura, you probably don't wear one, so this may not make much sense to you... Haha... Hahaha..."

Ms. Yamada tried to laugh it off, but the atmosphere in the classroom became weird and tense. I saw girls crossing their arms as if to shield their breasts; they seemed a lot more perturbed than I was. I felt the same as I had with Houki the day before— I wasn't going to make a fuss over girl's underwear. It was their behavior that made me uneasy... That contradiction of both wanting me to look at their breasts and not wanting it. This uncomfortable silence lasted for what felt like 10 or 20 minutes.

"Hmm... Ms. Yamada! Please continue the lesson," remarked Chifuyu.

"O-Okay!"

A loud, audible cough dispelled the awkwardness. Egged on by Chifuyu, Ms. Yamada looked back at the textbook and returned to the topic.

"A-Another important aspect is that the IS has something like a mind of its own and t-tries to talk to, um... I mean... Understand you and... Err... Reference your past piloting experiences to try and better adapt to you."

—All right, so training wasn't going to be for nothing.

"The point is that both of you are trying to understand each other, and by doing that you can bring out your full potential. The IS is not a tool, but a partner."

Every single girl raised her hand.

"Teach, does that mean it's like a boyfriend for us?"

"U-Um... Yes, I suppose so... I've never had one, so I don't know..."

I suspect that she referred to the "not having a boyfriend" bit. Ms. Yamada was looking away, red-faced. The girls in the class cast her a scornful glance and began to talk about men.

—*Truly, this is the essence of an all girls school.*

Air-sugar content: 10%. It wasn't just my class, the whole school felt saccharine. No, it didn't just feel like it, there was a sweet air. The entire school carried the sweet fragrance particular to girls. The day before had already been enough for me, and the second was beginning to make me sick.

"Mmm..."

"Wh-What is it, Ms. Yamada?"

"O-Oh... N-Nothing. Don't mind me."

Ms. Yamada gestured and tried to dodge the question. I could have sworn that she'd been staring at me, but then again, everyone was almost always staring at me.

Ding-dong.

"Ah, yes. In the next period we will cover the basics of aerial movement in an IS."

At the IS Academy, the homeroom teacher taught all classes except for physical education and special subjects. It made me appreciate the hard work of my old teachers more, who had to go back and forth between classes in the breaks.

"Hey, hey, Orimura!"

"Over here! I've got a question!"

"Got time over lunch? Time after school? Time tonight?"

The times of observing me from a distance were, apparently, over. As soon as Ms. Yamada and Chifuyu had left the classroom, about half the girls ran over to me. I could have sworn I heard some exclaim that "a British lady would not be the last one."

"Don't ask me all at once..."

I wasn't sure what to do. I was going to continue, but then I saw the girl holding a numbered ticket, and it had cost her money too. I was being raffled away or something.

"....."

Houki, my childhood friend, was standing to the side and watching the spectacle. She looked angry, as always, but I decided that didn't mean much. Life is a learning experience.

—*All right, what now?*

I was going to ask Houki to teach me something about the IS, but at this rate I'd have to ask her tonight. I barely had time to think that much before the looks of the girls around me began to sting; they wanted answers.

"How is Chifuyu at home?!"

"Um... The place is a big mess because of h—"

Bam!

"Break's over. Back to your seats."

When had she come up behind me, and what was with that timing? Was she trying to keep me from leaking personal info? Anyway, I wanted to warn my sister Chifuyu that if she kept hitting me she'd be pigeonholed as the comically violent side character— couldn't imagine anybody'd want that.

"By the way, Orimura, it will take some time until your IS unit is ready."

"Huh?"

"We have no spare units, so you'll have to wait a little. The academy will provide one exclusively to you."

".....?!"

I was left speechless as the classroom erupted into talking.

"A-An exclusive unit?! To a first-year? So soon already?!"

"That's only possible with government support..."

"Oh, wow... I'm so jealous... I want my own unit too..."

I didn't understand. Why were they so jealous? I gave my sister Chifuyu a blank look. She sighed and whispered something to me.

"Textbook, page six. Read that."

"U-Um... 'At present, IS technology is being shared with a diverse range of countries and companies, but the manufacturing technique of its core has not been disclosed. There are 467 IS units in the world. All their cores were created by Dr. Shinonono, and their function is a complete mystery— only the doctor is able to manufacture them. However, the doctor refuses to make more than a certain number of cores. These are then distributed to countries, corporations, and organizations to be used in research, development, and training. Transferring cores to others is in violation of article seven of the Alaska Pact and forbidden under all circumstances,'" I recited.

"There you have it; normally, you need to be affiliated with a country's government or a corporation to have your own IS unit. You're a special case, so you'll get your own unit for data collection. Got it?"

"S-Sorta..."

Let's go over that again:

1.) There were only 467 IS units in the world.

2.) Only Dr. Shinonono can make them, but she's not making them anymore.

3.) I'm getting special treatment. As a test case, though.

Something like that. It made perfect sense to me. Speaking of IS, Dr. Shinonono was...

“Um, Teach. Is Shinonono Houki related to Dr. Shinonono?” asked one of the girls to Chifuyu.

Well, Shinonono was a rare name; it wasn’t going to be a secret forever.

Shinonono Tabane: a prodigy of the modern age, and sole developer of the IS. She’d been in the same class as Chifuyu, and was also Houki’s sister. I’d met her a number of times before, myself— she was a genius through and through.

“Yes. Shinonono is her sister.”

—*Hey, Teach... Maybe keep personal info to yourself!*

Besides, Tabane was wanted based on supranational law. She hadn’t committed a crime exactly, but nations and organizations were uneasy that the sole person who understood the complete IS system had vanished. I doubt she cared about that, though. I still remembered how she looked like she was about to “eat” someone; truly, a wolf in sheep’s clothing. Meanwhile, my sister Chifuyu was just a straight up wolf. Wow, I was impressed with myself. What a perfect metaphor.

“Whoa! Th-That’s amazing! Two people in our class have famous relatives!”

“Hey, what’s Dr. Shinonono like? She’s a genius, right?”

“Are you a genius too, Shinonono? Teach me about the IS!”

Class had already begun, but girls were beginning to gather around Houki. It was looking pretty amusing. Obviously, nobody was going to help her.

—*Hmm, speaking of which, has Houki ever used an IS?*

I’d never seen her pilot one, and it wasn’t like Houki and Tabane got al—

“She’s got nothing to do with me!” Houki yelled.

I blinked, my reverie aborted. I glanced at Houki; the girls around her were just as shocked and confused.

“I’m sorry about that... But I’m not her. I can’t teach you anything.”

Houki turned her head back to the window and looked outside. The girls looked a little shell-shocked and returned to their seats. Has Houki always hated Tabane? I couldn’t recall a time I had ever seen them together, and I was pretty sure the conversation had always ended abruptly when we’d talked about her.

“All right. Time for your lesson. Ms. Yamada, you’re up.”

“O-Okay!”

Ms. Yamada seemed concerned with Houki as well, but she was a professional, and class was starting.

—*Guess I’ll ask Houki later...*

I opened my textbook.

“I’m relieved. I hoped you would not try to fight me in a training unit.”

—*Fascinating, Cecilia.*

During the break she had come over to talk to me, hands on her hips. She really liked that pose, not that I cared.

"Well, this has made it a little better, but it still isn't fair."

"Why?"

"Oh, you ignorant sheep. All right, I shall teach the rabble: I, Cecilia Alcott, am Britain's National Cadet. I have, at present already, my own unit!"

"Uh-huh."

"Are you making fun of me?!"

"Nah, I know it's amazing. I just have no sense of scale for how amazing it actually is."

"That's exactly what making fun of me is!"

Slam! She banged her hands on my table, causing my notes to slide off.

"Ahem— To reiterate our lesson just now: There are 467 IS units in the world. The few people who have their own units are the elite of the elite among the six billion humans alive."

"R-Really..."

"Yes."

"We have six billion people in the world?"

"That isn't the important part!"

Bam! This stupid girl slammed again, causing my textbook to fall off now.

"Enough! Stop making fun of me!"

"But I'm not."

"Then why is your voice so unimpressed?"

—*Goodness. Why, indeed?*

"What do you think, Houki?"

She gave me a sharp look. It took her 0.8 seconds to communicate to me that she wanted nothing to do with it.

"Speaking of which, you are Dr. Shinonono's sister, right?"

Houki stared at Cecilia, who had switched the brunt of her attack to her.

"What if I am?"

—*Don't be too hostile, Houki.*

Her stare was so menacing that Cecilia couldn't help but flinch back. Houki would make for a great gangster, honestly.

"U-Um... I want you to remember that it is I, Cecilia Alcott, who is the most capable of being the class representative!"

She threw her hair over her shoulder, turned around gracefully, and left. Her gestures always seemed very impressive. Maybe she had modeled for a while?

"Houki."

"....."

"Shinonono, let's go eat lunch."

It was important to cheer up your friends. Houki was looking kind of weird since what had happened earlier, and I couldn't overlook that.

"Anybody else want to come with us?"

I cast my bait out into the sea.

"Me, me, me!"

"I'll come! Hold on!"

"I made a lunch box, but I'll come, too!"

Plenty of fish bit. I wanted us to get along in the class. Houki probably felt the same way.

"I'm fine," said Houki, offhandedly.

"Come on, don't be like that. Let's go have some lunch, shall we?"

"H-Hey. I said I'm not going... Don't link arms with me!"

Hahaha. She was as predictable as always. Houki was the type of person you had to force into doing something they'd already wanted to do.

"What, you don't want to walk? Want me to carry you?"

"Wh...!"

Houki turned red. Excellent! Now she was going to come with us whether she wanted to or not.

"L-Let go!"

"Once we're at the cafeteria, I will."

"L-Let go now! Nnah!"

Houki squirmed, and suddenly my arm was turned at the elbow. There was a sharp pain, and the next moment I was lying sprawled out on the floor.

"....."

Ouch! There was a concentrated pain in my back, and the girls around us were staring in shock.

"You've gotten a lot better."

"Hmph. I'd say you've gotten weaker— I only learned this on the side."

She was probably the only girl in all of Japan who learned advanced martial arts "on the side."

"U-Um..."

"We should..."

"I-I think I'll stay here and eat..."

The girls I had gathered around us were dispersing like spider babies.

—*Stay here, morons. I brought you along for Houki's sake in the first place.*

"....."

I said goodbye to the floor and patted the dust off my clothes. Houki was turned the other way, as if to tell me that it wasn't her fault.

"Houki."

"D-Don't use my first name. I told you this b—"

"Let's go eat lunch."

I took her by the hand and dragged her to the cafeteria.

"H-Hey! Stop this!"

"Just shut up and come with me."

"Ngh..."

Houki didn't talk back again, and followed me instead. I wish she'd done that from the beginning. Good grief.

We arrived in the cafeteria. It was super congested, but we managed to find a place where we could eat.

"Houki, you'll eat anything, right? It doesn't matter what's on the table?"

"D-Don't talk about me like a dog or a cat. I like some things more."

"Hmm, I bought us two of today's special from the ticket machine. That's okay, right? Look, it's grilled salmon."

"Are you listening to me?!"

"Nope. Do you know how hard I worked to make that possible earlier? And you ruined it all. What if you can't make friends now? Don't you want friends in high school?"

"I-I'm fine... I didn't ask you to do that!"

"I'm not saying you did—"

"Ah, excuse me. I'll have two daily specials, please," I told the lunch lady. "And I just turn these in here, right?"

I awkwardly handed the plastic chips in at the counter with my free hand, as my other was preoccupied with holding Houki down to keep her from running away. Her evasion stat was at least as high as a Cactuar's.

"Listen, usually I wouldn't do this even if someone asked me to. I'm doing this because of you, Houki."

"What do you mean..."

"That's obvious, right? Your family took care of us and we went to school together. We were friends. Let me do this for you."

"....."

Houki frowned and looked at the ceiling. She'd become a bit rebellious after moving with her family. Actually, she'd always been like that; Houki kind of drifted away from others when you didn't pull her along.

"U-Um... Thank y—"

"Here ya go! Two daily specials," proclaimed the lunch lady.

"Thanks. Whoa, this looks really good!" I replied.

"It's not just good, it's great!" roared the lunch lady, a smile across her face.

"Houki, do you see an empty table?"

"....."

"Houki?"

I looked at her since she didn't answer. She looked even angrier than usual.

"Over there."

She shrugged off my hand, took her meal, and walked away. Why was she so angry again? I followed Houki and we sat down at a table.

"By the way..."

"Yes?"

Houki was eating her soup as she answered. I was attending to my salmon.

"Can you teach me something about the IS? I'm afraid I might lose next week at this rate."

"It's your own fault for agreeing to that ridiculous challenge, you idiot."

—I guess that was true, but come on...

"Please, I'm begging you," I implored, making a prayer gesture with chopsticks still in hand.

A man couldn't back down from what he said he'd do. And if he said he was going to win, then win he would.

"....."

Silence. She was ignoring me, and eating spinach cooked in soy sauce. How fearsome!

"Hey, Houki, I—"

"Hey, are you the one they're all talking about?" asked a girl from nearby.

I looked at her. Based on the color of her ribbon, she looked to be about two grades higher: first year was blue, second yellow, third red. Her hair was kind of curly and easy to remember. She looked very likable, a bit like a squirrel. The contrast with my reticent childhood friend was startling, and I wasn't too happy about that. I figured that two years didn't just make you look more mature.

—See, Houki? That's the kind of sociability you need.

"Yeah, probably."

With effortless, natural movements she came and sat down next to me, and continued the conversation.

"Are you really going to battle a National Cadet?"

"Something like that."

Man, rumors sure spread fast. If there were two things girls loved, it was gossip and bargain sales.

"You're still new to all of this, right? How much seat time do you even have in an IS?"

"Uhh... Probably about twenty minutes."

"That's nowhere near enough. Seat time is really important, you know? And your opponent is a National Cadet? She probably has three hundred hours or more in one."

I had no idea what kind of piloting time was good or bad, so that meant nothing to me. Either way, it was clear that I was going to lose to Cecilia if I didn't do something.

"Say, want me to teach you about the IS? Hmm?"

She was edging ever closer to me, yet I still didn't know her name. Wow. What a nice person. Definitely a lot better than a certain childhood friend of mine. Or, as the saying goes: When one door is shut, you enter through the window.

"Sure, I'll gl—"

I wanted to say that I would gladly accept, but I was interrupted.

"We're fine. I will teach him."

Houki was still eating, but apparently talking again. And, apparently, she was going to teach me about the IS now.

"Aren't you a first year, too? I would say I'm more experienced than you."

"My sister is Shinonono Tabane," said Houki, reluctantly.

She was determined to teach me, it seemed.

"Shinonono... What?!"

The other girl was completely dumbfounded. Well, the sister of the woman who invented the IS was sitting in front of her. Couldn't blame her.

"As you can see, we will be fine."

"I-I see... That's too bad..."

Nothing less of a world-class genius's... sister. Most people backed down at the mere mention of her name. The very nice older girl left, somewhat disappointed. Her gesture was very much appreciated, though.

"What?"

"Uh... Are you really going to teach me?"

"That's what I said."

Things would have gone more smoothly if she'd said that right off the bat. Either way, I had someone who was going to teach me how to pilot an IS. All that's left to do is get to it.

"Today, after school."

"Eh?"

"Come to the kendo hall. I'll check whether your skills have dulled."

"Hey, I thought we were learning about—"

"I will check your skills."

"Fine..."

Why were all the girls I knew so stubborn? Perhaps that was the kind of star I'd been born under. Goodness gracious.



"What's with this?"

"I'm... not too sure myself."

We were at the kendo hall together after school. There were a ton of spectators and Houki was understandably upset. We had barely fought for 10 minutes, and I had lost by a landslide.

Houki removed her helmet and glared at me.

"Why are you so weak?!"

"I was studying for the entrance exams."

"Which club were you in in middle school?"

"The 'Go Home' club, where you go straight home after school. Won every tournament for three years."

Actually, I was working a job to help our finances.

"I will correct this..."

"You'll what?"

"I will train you! This is a more basic problem than the IS! We will train for three hours every evening!"

"Uh. That sounds like a bit much... I mean, what about the IS?"

"Like I said, this is a way more basic problem."

Man, she was so angry at me. I had no idea what to say.

"This is sad. You lost to a girl at kendo... Are you not disappointed, Ichika?! This isn't even about the IS yet, and look how you are!"

"I dunno, I guess I didn't cut the best figure, huh?"

"'Cut the best figure?' You're not in a position to worry about that! Or do you, uh... Do you enjoy being surrounded by all these girls?"

Snap. Enough was enough! There were limits, and Houki had finally gone too far.

"As if! They treat me like some rare animal! And this stupid school is even making me live together with a girl! I dunno what I did to—"

"A-Are you saying you have a problem with me being your roommate?!"

Bam! I barely managed to block her bamboo sword with mine.

—*Step off, you idiot!*

We weren't wearing our kendo helmets anymore. The danger levels were real.

"C-Calm down, Houki. I don't want to die yet, and I'm sure you don't want to be a murderer, either. You've got your whole life ahead of you, right?"

Houki was pressuring me with both arms while I was blocking her with only one. My right hand was trembling from fending her off, while my left pressed the helmet into my chest.

"Houki, please. I'll buy you dinner, okay?"

"Hmph... Weakling."

Houki dropped her stance, cast me a scornful look, and disappeared towards the changing room. I was relieved to have survived again. I felt like my life was a roller coaster.

—*Good God...*

Houki had gotten really strong. When we were young, I'd always won pretty easily. My hand was beginning to sting where Houki's sword had struck; it was going to swell up.

"Did you see Orimura?"

"He's pretty weak, huh?"

"Can he really control an IS?"

I could hear the disappointed mumbling among the spectators.

—*Damn it...*

There was nothing more pitiful than a man losing to a woman. But most of all, I was mad at myself— in the state I was in, I wasn't going to be protecting anybody, let alone winning. I was feeling a kind of shock and disappointment that I rarely felt.

"Guess I'll have to train again."

When you're at the absolute bottom of your abilities, there's nowhere else to go but up, and I was as low as you could possibly get right now.

—All right, let's do this. I refuse to lose.



—Maybe I went a little too far?

I couldn't shake these thoughts from my mind. My childhood friend, reunited with me after six years. When I looked at him, a part seemed to be the same as when he was a child, and another had grown up with age. It had made my heart beat so fast.

—N-No, what I said was fine. He let himself go. Clearly he hasn't held a sword in over a year, otherwise he wouldn't have lost to me so easily.

"....."

Ichika had been really strong six years ago, and he was always just so cool.

—I-I mean, well... He l-looked cool doing it...

Ichika had matured a lot since then. As a kid he was rather bratty, but now he seemed a lot more... manly. Still, he let himself go. He should be ashamed of himself for losing so easily! Geez. The mere thought of that battle was upsetting.

What happened to him? He was super into kendo before. Had he just abandoned it? That's not what a real man does! It's said that if you stop practicing for three days, you lose a week of training— that described Ichika perfectly. It wasn't just bad technique; his execution and situational awareness had deteriorated. Getting that back was going to take time. After all, they came as a result of many hours of training. Difficult to gain, easy to lose.

—But he also...

I pulled the towel off my hair and touched it. My hair was so long now that it almost reached my waist even when it was tied up. I was amazed that he had still recognized me.

—Six years...

We'd been only nine, then. Our bodies and our faces had changed and grown, but I was quite sure he had recognized me even before we had introduced ourselves.

"Hehe..."

Somehow, that made me very happy. I was only able to recognize Ichika because I saw his name in the news together with a picture; without it, I honestly wouldn't have been able to tell it was him. He'd become so masculine!

—In fact, you could say he's looking... handsome, now.

I almost dropped my teacup in disbelief when I first saw him on the news. Ichika said that he read about me winning the national kendo tournament in the newspaper, but there probably wasn't a picture there. Still, he'd said he recognized me immediately. That made me happy, too.

—It's a good thing I didn't change my hairstyle...

I had kept it all this time with hopes that, someday, he would see me and recognize it.

—But it feels so awkward now, though, compared to when we were kids. At our age, boy and girls would start to...

“Hah...?!”

I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but my reflection seemed a lot more bright-eyed than normal, almost like a different person.

“.....”

It didn't make sense. I was the same as always, but not. Whatever. Now was not the time to worry about such things, when there were more important problems at hand. Time was of the essence.

—I'll have to train him starting tomorrow after school. I need him to be at least average in skill.

Anything else would have been a disgrace. Truly unacceptable! I crossed my arms and nodded at my reflection.

—Besides... With this, Ichika and I would be alone together and...

“No! Th-That's not what this is about!”

Right. There was absolutely no ulterior motive, none whatsoever. I'm pure. I'm only lamenting the lack of skill of a fellow student. And because he's my fellow student, I need to look after him. Nothing weird about it at all!

“This is legitimate! LE-GI-TI-MATE!”

It was now the next Monday: the day of my battle with Cecilia had arrived.

“Hey, Houki.”

“Yeah, Ichika?”

After a week of living together, Houki and I had gone back to using each other's first names. Perhaps the six years we hadn't seen each other didn't matter all that much? Things were good.

“Aren't we forgetting something?”

“I don't think so. Must be your imagination.”

No. One problem definitely remained.

“What happened to teaching me about the IS?”

“.....”

“Don't... Ignore... Me... Now...”

A week had passed in which Houki had practiced kendo very diligently with me. The problem was that we hadn't done anything else.

“Th-There was nothing we could do. Your IS unit hadn't arrived yet.”

“I guess so— No! You could have at least taught me basic knowledge or something!”

“.....”

“I said... Don't... Ignore... Me...”

Right. Apparently something had gone wrong with my unit and it hadn't arrived yet. Yes, it still hadn't arrived. What was keeping them?

"....."

"....."

Houki and I were silent.

"O-Orimura! Orimura! Orimura!"

She didn't have to call me three times. Ms. Yamada was running over to us at the third arena, pit A. She always looked like she was about to sprawl out onto the ground with her unsteady running. It made me actively nervous. But this time, she was even less steady on her feet.

"Ms. Yamada, please calm down. Take a deep breath."

"Y-Yes... Nnahhh... Nnahhh..."

"And now stop."

"Mmn—"

I said that on a whim. Ms. Yamada stopped breathing. Her face was beginning to get red from lack of oxygen. She really didn't understand when people were messing with her.

"....."

"Pfwah! Do I have to hold my breath longer?"

Nah, I just forgot to tell her to stop.

"Don't mess with your teachers, you moron."

Bam!

I felt like something blew out my brains again. The pain wasn't a big deal, maybe as much as the fizz of a soft drink, but the damage to my brain cells was no joke. Nothing less from Japan's representative!

"Chifuyu..."

Wham!

"I told you, it's Ms. Orimura. When are you going to learn? If you won't learn, then die."

I was hoping someone heard that. No teacher should talk like that. That right there was the reason she didn't have a boyfriend, despite her good looks.

"Hmph. I could get married in a week if I didn't have to take care of my idiotic little brother."

Was she telepathic or something? I was no match for Chifuyu, in more ways than one.

"A-A-Anyway! It came! Your IS unit is here!"

—*It's here?*

"Suit up, Orimura. We don't have the arena forever, so I want you out on the field immediately."

—*Excuse me?*

"Show me that real men can overcome obstacles as trivial as this, Ichika."

—*Wait a sec.*

"Uh... Um... Err..."

"Go on already!"

Ms. Yamada, Chifuyu, and Houki were all egging me on. The women around me were all like that, among other things.

With a sharp metallic sound, the storage bay of the pit opened. The blast doors released diagonally, and as they drew apart, the area beyond slowly came into view: it was... white. Stark white, as far as the eye could see. The IS unit was so unadorned that it was almost blinding. And it stood there, armor plates open, waiting for a pilot.

"This is..."

"Yes! This is your personal IS unit, Byakushiki!"

My IS. It was an inorganic robot, and yet it seemed to be waiting for me. Waiting... forever... for... this... moment... Waiting... for... so... long...

"Hurry up! Get in the damn robot. We don't have all day, you can format it and do the fitting in battle. If not, you lose. Got it?"

Urged on, I touched the pure, white IS.

"Huh?"

I didn't receive the kind of electric shock I felt when I had touched the test IS unit. I only melted into it. Understood it; what it was, what it could do. I understood.

"Give yourself to it... Yeah. Like that. Like you're sitting. The system will determine the best fit."

I did as my sister said and leaned into my IS, Byakushiki. It caught me and enveloped my body in armor. There was a sizzling sound as air was expelled, and then I felt as though the unit had always been a part of me. I was connected to Byakushiki... It felt as though it had been made only for me, and me alone. I perceived the world around me more clearly, like the resolution was raised. All the sensors of the unit interfaced straight into my field of view, and I understood intuitively what they meant.

"Oh..."

[ENEMY UNIT DETECTED. PILOT: CECILIA ALCOTT. IS NAME: BLUE TEARS. COMBAT SPECIALIZATION: MID-RANGE FIRE. SPECIAL EQUIPMENT DETECTED.]

"It looks like the IS hypersensors are working properly. Do you feel all right, Ichika?"

Chifuyu looked to me like always, but I detected slight tremors in her voice. She was worried about me.

"I'm fine, Chifuyu. I can do this."

"I see."

She was relieved. The change in her voice was so faint that I wouldn't have picked it up without the IS hypersensors.

—I probably would have. She used my first name for once.

I turned my attention to Houki. I didn't have to look directly at her, though. Everything around me was visible through the IS.

"....."

She looked like she wanted to say something, but didn't quite know what it was. Under normal circumstances, insight at this level would be impossible.

"Houki."

"Y-Yes?"

"I'll be back."

"O-Okay. Make sure you win."

I nodded and went towards the gate to the pit. Byakushiki obeyed even the softest of my movements, and I drifted towards the gate.

Sssssss.

My thoughts were clear, but in the back of my mind Byakushiki was processing a vast amount of information. I could feel it trying to determine the optimal fitting for my body, and also initialize the formatting. With every passing second the armor layers changed and shifted—it rewrote its own software, and rearranged the hardware. The meters were displaying orders of a magnitude that I'd never seen before. Sadly, I didn't have time to pay attention to background processes. The gate was going to open in 2.05718422 seconds, and the real battle would begin.

"Oh, you haven't tried to run away, I see," Cecilia cooed.

She had her arms on her hips again. It looked pretty good. That was none of my concern, though. That wasn't what the hypersensors relayed to me.

Her light blue unit was named Blue Tears. It had four visually striking armored fins on the back. As a unit, it looked noble, similar to a royal knight. She carried a unique gun, more than two meters in length: a 67-caliber laser rifle called a Starlight Mk. III. Originally the IS were designed with outer space in mind, so levitation was part of its design. And due to the levitation, using large, unwieldy weapons wasn't uncommon.

The arena had a diameter of 200 meters. The unit estimated that a shot would hit me 0.4 seconds after firing. The bell signaling the beginning of the battle had already rung. She could have fired at any moment.

"I will give you one last chance."

She had one hand on her hip, the other pointed at me. The gun was in her left and still pointed at the ground.

"Last chance for what?"

"This battle has a foregone conclusion. If you don't want to be crawling in the dirt by the end, I will let you off easy if you apologize!" she said, with the widest smile across her face.

[WARNING: ENEMY IS PILOT WEAPON-SAFETY DISENGAGED. LEFT-EYE LOCK-ON DETECTED.]

I could instantly process the information the IS was giving me, but so much of it flooded in at once that it was still almost overwhelming.

"Don't act like there's even a choice!"

"Is that so? Such a shame. Well, then—"

[WARNING: ENEMY IS PILOT FIRE-MODE ENGAGED. TRIGGER PULL AND ENERGY CHARGE DETECTED.]

"Goodbye!"

Wa—shiiing!

The sound of her shot pierced through the air. Immediately after, a bright flash raced squarely towards me.

"WHOA!"

Byakushiki's auto-guard had, apparently, protected me. I'd been able to avoid a full hit, but the shot had blasted off a part of my left shoulder armor that was still in the process of recalculation. The delayed sonic boom slammed my left arm aside, and the IS unit transmitted a flash of pain to me as feedback. The IS' automatic altitude control system pulled so many G-forces that it made my head spin, but they also kept me from blacking out. The constant jostling was stomach turning.

[BARRIER PENETRATED: 46 POINTS. SHIELD ENERGY REMAINING: 521. DAMAGE TO FRAME: MINIMAL.]

—Shit, I'm not keeping up with Byakushiki.

Generally, IS battles were over once the shield energy of one side had been drained to zero. However, if an attack penetrated the shield barrier, it could still damage the frame. That was unrelated to the remaining shield charge, but physical damage to the frame usually affected combat in some way.

By the way, all IS units were equipped with an "Absolute Defense" system that prevented the pilot from dying. Even taking extreme amounts of damage was only going to drain the shield, or so the textbook said; I wasn't sure whether or not that was true. My shoulder armor had been blown off because the IS had decided that it wasn't essential to my survival, and so the Absolute Defense system wasn't activated.

"Now dance! Dance to the waltz of me, Cecilia Alcott, and Blue Tears!"

Another shot, and another, and another. They fell down on me like rain. All shots were the work of precision aiming, and simply holding on would only last for so long. Byakushiki bombarded me with sirens, alerting me to the fact that my shield was being whittled away.

"Don't I have some kind of weapon?!" I yelled.

Byakushiki immediately displayed a list of my equipment to me.

—A list? No, there's...

"There's only one thing?"

All it showed was a "Close-Combat Blade."

—Goddamn. Are you serious?

"Whatever, I'll take it!"

Figuring that was better than fighting empty-handed, I called for the "Close-Combat Blade" to appear. *[REAL NAME NOT SET.]*

T—ching!

"Fighting a mid-range unit like mine with close-combat weapons is the height of foolishness!"

Cecilia attacked immediately. I was able to dodge her fire, but closing the 27 meter gap between us was a whole different story. I may as well have been on the other side of the planet. But—

“I have to try...!”

I couldn’t afford to pull back. The battle had begun.

“27 minutes. I’m amazed you held on. That’s impressive in and of itself.”

“Th... Thanks...”

My shield was down to 67, and the frame had taken considerable of damage. I could still fight and use my sword, but just barely.

“You’re the first one who’s managed to hold on for such a long time in their initial encounter with my ‘Blue Tears.’”

Cecilia patted the four autonomous weapons floating around her, like someone would pat a dog bringing back a Frisbee. The four fins on her back could separate and fire a short range BT laser, and were also apparently the source of the name “Blue Tears.”

More precisely, the floating guns were called “Blue Tears,” and so the IS frame carrying them into battle had assumed that name as well. Cecilia had talked a lot about it during the previous 27 minutes, even when nobody was listening (thanks for the lecture!).

“Well, let the curtain rise on the finale!” Cecilia jeered, thrusting out her right arm.

The “Blue Tears,” or “bits” as I called them, immediately spread out and surrounded me, having received their order.

“Ngh...!”

The bits above and below me started to glow and fired their lasers. At the same time, Cecilia fired her rifle at me, and I dodged or blocked the shots, just barely. That was the way it’d been going for a while now.

“I will shoot your left leg off!”

—*No! I’d already lost my armor there, one more shot would trigger the Absolute Defense system.*

The energy usage would have consumed all my shield charge, which meant that I would lose. All right, it was time for desperate measures.

“HAAAAAAAAAAH!”

With a loud roar and a sharp flash, I took the IS unit to the limit and slammed into Cecilia head on. The impact threw off her aim and caused the final shot to miss.

“Wha— Nice moves, but you’re struggling in vain!”

Cecilia pulled back and thrust out her left hand. The bits floating around immediately began to fly at me.

—*I see, so that’s how they work.*

I flew through the barrage of lasers and swung at one of them. My sword cut through the heavy metal; a feeling of resistance transmitted to my hand. Blue lightning arched over the cut, and after a moment, the bit exploded: One down.

“What?!”

I swung my sword downwards at a shocked Cecilia.

“Tch...!”

Cecilia dodged backwards away from my blow, and thrust out her arm again. Bits No. 2 and No. 3 came flying at me.

“These weapons of yours don’t move unless you issue orders every single time! And what’s more...”

I predicted the movements of the bits and hacked the thruster off of bit No. 2.

“While you’re giving orders, you can’t attack! It requires all your focus to control them, isn’t that right?!”

“.....!”

Cecilia’s eyes trembled. Bullseye!

Two bits were left. I could predict their movements. They always positioned themselves in such a way that my reactions would be delayed. The IS and its wide-area visual feed were flawless. However, I was still a human, and I couldn’t process things outside of my physical field of view as intuitively. It took me a few milliseconds more to understand the information the IS fed directly into my brain. Cecilia was banking on that.

On the other hand, that meant I could force them into specific locations. The logic was simple: abuse the fact that they would move according to my own movements. With that in mind I would be a step ahead, instead of behind.

—I can do this. I just gotta focus.

I clenched my right hand around the hilt of my sword; my time spent practicing with Houki was rushing back into me. Focus was both the art and the basis of sword fighting. My ability as a fighter may have dulled, but wasn’t gone just yet. I felt like the movements of my IS were becoming lighter, faster. I would have expected my unit to lose maneuverability due to frame damage, but the responsiveness was actually much better than it had been earlier.

—I just need to find a way to close the distance, and it’s all over.

Cecilia’s unit was, as she’d self-described, a mid-range one. Her large rifle wasn’t going to be very useful in close-combat, and at a glance, it didn’t seem like she had any more suitable equipment at her disposal. Perhaps all her close-combat equipment was on standby, but she’d still have to spend time getting it out. The path to victory was laid bare.



“Wow... Orimura is really good...” Yamada Maya sighed, as she looked at monitors down in the pit.

Ichika was far better than one would expect of someone who was only using an IS for the second time. In contrast, Chifuyu was looking at the monitors with a foul mood.

“That moron. He’s getting cocky.”

“How do you know?”

"He's been clenching his left fist. He always does that right before he makes a dumb mistake."

"Hehehe... Siblings know each other so well. You pick up even on the little things."

Maya was saying this as much to herself as to Chifuyu, but it took her aback.

"W-Well, uh... He's kind of my brother..."

"Oh, are you turning pink? You're turning pink!"

"....."

Krrrk. Chifuyu took her into a stranglehold.

"Ouuuchh..."

"I hate being made fun of."

"O-Okay! Okay! I got it! Please let g— Ahhh!"

Houki paid Maya no heed and simply watched the monitors. Her expression was very stern.

"....."

She didn't put her hands together and pray or anything like that. She wasn't that kind of person. That, in a way, was the reason why her expression was so complex.

"Ichika..."

Houki bit her lip just as the battle was at a turning point.

◇

—I got her now!

I closed the distance to Cecilia and destroyed bit No. 3. Then, with the anti-gravity system of the IS, I made a roundhouse kick for bit No. 4. Cecilia wasn't going to be able to aim her gun at me in time. I was sure I could get a hit in on her.

"Got you," Cecilia smiled.

—Shit!

All my instincts were screaming. Immediately I tried to get some distance between us, but it was too late.

Whirrr!

The skirt-shaped armor plates retracted from Cecilia's waist, and two objects moved from underneath.

"I'm sorry, but there are six 'Blue Tears!'"

I wasn't going to be able to dodge them. They weren't like the bits that fired lasers. These were missiles.

KA-BOOM! I was enveloped in the red and white flames of the explosion.

◇

"Ichika!" Houki yelled, at the monitor.

Chifuyu and Maya had also forgotten their fight and were looking at the fire and smoke on the monitors.

"Hmph."

When the smoke cleared, Chifuyu snorted. Still, she looked relieved.

“Guess the unit saved that idiot.”

The last clouds of smoke drifting across the screen were cleared away. And at the center of the screen stood the unit in pure white— its true form revealed.



[FORMATTING AND FITTING COMPLETE. PLEASE PRESS TO CONFIRM.]

—*Wh-What?*

Data streamed into my consciousness. A window appeared in front of my eyes; at the center of it was a button that simply said “Confirm.” I pressed it, not really understanding what it would do, and another flood of data went into my brain. Or, more strictly speaking, rearranged it for me. I understood it intuitively, and the changes were immediate.

Shiiiiing.

There was a noise of metallic high-frequency. It sounded gentle, almost soothing. In the space of an instant, the IS that enveloped me— no, the IS that was me— dissolved into particles of light and reformed itself.

“This is...”

When it had taken shape again, the armor plates glimmered faintly. All the damage I had sustained was gone. And more so, the IS now looked a lot more advanced and refined.

“N-No way! Was that the First Shift? D-Did you really fight me on default settings?!”

The window earlier had told me that formatting and fitting were complete. So, that was what that meant. With that, the unit was finally, truly, mine. I looked at the IS again. All the rough industrial finish had disappeared, replaced by clean surfaces and sharp lines that reminded me of medieval armor.

What had changed the most was my weapon.

My close-combat blade now had a name: Yukihiro Nigata.

Its shape reminded me of a katana, but it was more strongly curved, and had a thicker blade. There was a shallow fuller in the back through which light pulsed like a human breath; it looked strikingly mechanical, in a way. Any onlooker would know exactly that it was custom-made for an IS.



—Yukihira...

That had been the name of my sister's sword for her own IS, and now I wielded that name as my own. Yukihira Nigata.

—*Is this an upgraded version of my sister's weapon? Oh, man. Everything keeps reminding me of her.*

"I have the best sister in the world!"

That had been the case 3 years before that, 6 years before that, and probably all 15 as well. My sister was the best. Still, I didn't want her to support me forever. It was time I took a stand.

"I'm going to take care of my family now."

"What? What are you talking about?"

"And to start with, I'm going to make sure Chifuyu's name is well-remembered!"

I was the brother of the former national representative. If I messed up, it was going to reflect poorly on her. She'd always looked amazing at whatever she'd done. I had to make sure that survived. My resolve was set.

"It's kinda funny, isn't it?"

"What on Earth have you been talking about? Argh, let's just end this now!"

Cecilia sent the missile pods she'd revealed towards me. They spread out to surround me again. Their speed was much faster than the laser bits, but not fast enough.

—*I can see them!*

I clenched my right fist. I could feel the weight of Yukihira, and hear the sound of its mechanisms. I knew how to use it. I'd seen my sister use it countless times, even though she hadn't wanted me to. Her movements were seared into my memory.

Bzzzm!

A horizontal slash. The bit was split clean in two, swept aside by my IS, and exploded behind me. Before the blast wave reached me, I was already speeding away towards Cecilia. The unit's acceleration and sensor resolution was orders of magnitude better than before. It was far easier to control as well.

"RAAAHH!"

I could feel that the energy density in my hand had increased. Glowing particles coated Yukihira like a sheath, its power now measures higher than before.

—*I can do this!*

I swung the sword upwards in a decisive slash, aimed directly at Cecilia's abdomen.

But before the sword connected, a buzzer rang out.

"Battle over. Winner: Cecilia Alcott."

—*Huh?*

"What...?"

I wasn't sure what had happened. Cecilia was directly in front of me, her mouth was open. She was just as confused as I.

The same went for the audience in the third arena, for Houki, and for Ms. Yamada in the control room. The only one who wasn't surprised was Chifuyu.

The battle ended. And I had lost.



"Nice speech earlier. All that talk, and you still end up like this? You're an enormous idiot."

The battle was over. My sister upgraded me from idiot to enormous idiot, not a promotion I was happy about. Not like my sister would ever have demoted me on the idiocy scale.

"That happened because you used your weapon without knowing what it does. Now you know how that turns out. Starting tomorrow, you need to train properly. Pilot your IS when you have time. Got it?"

"Okay..."

All I could muster was a nod. It was pretty sad to lose after such a dramatic speech.

"Now then, the IS unit is on standby, but we can give it to you anytime you request it. Still, rules are rules, so you will have to read this. Here."

Slam!

It seemed to generate its own gravitational field. The book's cover said "IS Rulebook," but it would have put a telephone directory to shame. It was incredibly fat, and the pages were flimsy and thin.

"That is all for today. Go home and rest."

There was no softness in her command. I really hoped she'd learn that the stick is meaningless without a carrot. Besides, was there any reason for me to try and take care of her?

"Let's go."

Oh, there she was. The second victim of clinical love deficiency. Her name was Houki, my childhood friend.

We walked in the direction of the dorms; the fatigue had started to set in.

"....."

"Wh-What?"

We were walking side by side and Houki had been looking at me for a while, like I was some kind of rare monster.

"Loser."

—*Ugh. Give me a break, Houki.*

She was like some priest resurrecting adventurers with 1 HP at the cost of a fortune, and sending them into the dungeon without equipment. Don't they say that humans are the real demons? Well, you could say I knew a demon myself.

You know that thing they do in chapters where shit hits the fan: Your old enemy comes back as your ally, your old ally turns out to be the evil mastermind, and the fate of the world rests on your shoulders.

—*No... F-F...*

“FIND SOMEONE ELSE!”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

I said it out loud because it was so important, but if I’d known that Houki would glare at me, I wouldn’t have. All the really important things in life can’t be seen— some dead writer said that.

“Today, April 9th, Houki has glared at me, so let this day henceforth be known as ‘Houki Day.’”

“Are you ridiculing me right now?”

“Nooope.”

“That sounded sarcastic.”

“*Nooope*. See, sounds normal. They always say it like that in South America.”

“Hmph...”

Houki drew her bamboo sword. What, practicing out on campus grounds? How diligent. Rest is also important if you want to train, Houki. Just jumping around all the time doesn’t do much good.

Bam!

“Hey! What was that for?!”

“There was a moron who needed to be smacked.”

She said that like someone would say “It was raining, so I used an umbrella.” Violence was creeping into our daily life. Where was the government when you needed it?

“Are you, like, the slasher in town? Our next tyrant?”

“Want another strike?”

“No, I’m sorry. I’ll shut up.”

Houki nodded and put away her bamboo sword. She was scarier than Mount Doom. Then again, I guess Mount Doom itself wasn’t very scary.

“.....”

“.....”

Houki and I walked in silence for a while. It wasn’t like we had nothing to talk about, but I was still angry at myself for having lost and couldn’t bring myself to talk to her.

In times like these, I just wanted to take a bath. At some point I’d told Gotanda that lying in a bathtub is super chill and lets you forget everything, but he told me that was something only old men do. The guy had no goddamn taste for the finer things in life.

—*Ah, but the girl next to me is basically the embodiment of the finer things in life...*

Houki would probably understand what I meant. If you told foreigners that she was a time-traveler from the Edo period, 6 out of 10 would believe it. —Source: Personal Investigations

“Ichika.”

“Hm? Yeah?”

Whoa, she struck up a conversation first. Was this the fabled telepathy? It was coming in handy. Much better than a cell phone for sure, and there was no monthly charge. Truly amazing.

“Um, are you... upset you lost?”

“Yeah, of course. Why wouldn’t I be upset?”

“O-Okay... All right...”

What was she talking about? That it was all right that I lost? Wow, she was a cruel girl.

“S-Starting tomorrow... Yeah. We’ll have to practice with the IS.”

Houki continued, and looked strangely distant. Maybe not distant, but fidgety.

“So, are you going to teach me how to pilot it? Properly?”

“I-I’m not going to force you. Maybe you should ask your sister instead.”

“No, I don’t want Chifuyu to teach me. Besides, that’d look like favoritism, wouldn’t it?”

“Y-You could also ask one of the third year girls to teach you. Experience is important.”

For someone who’d been dodging this exact topic earlier, Houki was sure debating it a lot now. And why was she glancing over at me all the time, like she was expecting something of me?

“Okay, if you don’t want to do it then I can ask someo—”

“I-I’m not saying I don’t want to!” Houki exclaimed.

Apparently she realized how aggressive she was being, and changed her posture.

“I-I, um... Ahem. Do you want me to teach you, Ichika?”

“Yeah, I do.”

It would definitely be better than some other girl teaching me. I also figured she knew a lot about the IS since she was Tabane’s sister.

“O-Okay... I see. I see. All right. Hehe. Fine, then.”

Houki looked quite happy suddenly.

—*Was it something I said...?*

She was so happy, she was running her fingers through her long ponytail.

“All right. Then I will teach you. As an *exception*.”

She emphasized that last part. Well, I was thankful of it regardless. If I lost to a girl again, that would have killed my pride as man, though it was already half dead from the previous battle anyway. I’d be a zombie in no time.

“Okay. Make sure you have time after school tomorrow. Got it?”

“Right.”

I wasn't going to join a club anyway because there were no guys in them, so that was fine with me. I'd embarrassed my sister Chifuyu: that made me more upset than anything. I had to become stronger.

"By the way, Houki."

"Hm? Yeah?"

Oh, she was in a good mood. I decided to just throw the question I'd been wanting to ask at her straight away.

"Did you have to go to the bathroom, or something, earlier?"

Bam! The bamboo sword had struck right between my eyes.



Fssshh.

The showerhead spread warm water across her body; droplets broke on her skin and slid slowly down her frame.

Cecilia had always been proud of the elegant beauty in which her body's well-balanced proportions were arrayed. Her legs were long, seductive and well-shaped; easily able to compete with models, and more beautiful than most of them.

Her breasts were somewhat modest compared to those of other white girls her age, but since they also emphasized the curves of her body more, she could accept them. On the other hand, compared to a Japanese girl's, her breasts were quite large.

The water ran down her chest as she stood still, lost in thought.



—*That battle...*

She still didn't know why Ichika's shield energy suddenly had hit zero. Who knows what would have happened if that final attack had connected? Cecilia was always confident in her ability and wanted to improve her skills, but the uncertainty over what had transpired made her very unhappy.

—*I won, but...*

She didn't understand it. There was no enjoyment to be had.

—*Orimura... Ichika...*

She thought back on that man... The flames of determination in his eyes. An unwillingness to desist, the burning desire to succeed. Cecilia was suddenly reminded of her father, as a stark contrast.

—*My father was always waiting for my mother to tell him what to do...*

He had married into an important family, and must have felt vastly inferior to her mother. From the time she was very small, Cecilia had been looking at her father, determined not to marry a weak man like him. And after the IS was invented, her father had become even more servile and slavish. This had begun to frustrate her mother, and she developed a habit of refusing to talk to him.

“.....”

Her mother had been a strong woman. One who had found success in society, even before women had begun to completely dominate men, and had her own company. She had been strict and austere. Cecilia had always looked up to her as an ideal.

Yes—in the past. Her parents were no longer. They had died in an accident three years prior.

At that time, they had been living apart already. Cecilia didn't know why they were together on that day. There had been numerous conspiracy theories around their deaths, but they didn't match up to the circumstances: a train had vaulted off the tracks. It was a huge tragedy, and more than a hundred had been killed or injured. And just like that, her parents had disappeared. Time had passed quickly afterward.

Her parents had left her a very large inheritance. She had spent a lot of time learning how she could protect it from the vultures. As part of her efforts, she had received an A+ on the IS aptitude test. The government had offered extensive privileges to entice her to keep her nationality, and she had accepted immediately. It had been the easiest way for her to protect her inheritance. She had been picked as the first-generation test pilot of the third-generation IS, Blue Tears. To gather combat experience and test data, she had come to Japan.

And here... She had met him, Orimura Ichika. That strong man she had dreamed of.

“Orimura Ichika...”

She tried saying it. She could feel her chest tightening. Her heart pounded as she ran her fingers over her beautiful lips, which droplets of

water rested upon. Her lips seemed to want to be touched, and it excited her.

“.....”

It was a sweet, warm feeling, full of happiness and longing. Her curiosity was piqued. What was that torrent of emotion that filled her chest the moment she paid attention to it? She wanted to know more: what this was, and what it would lead to. She wanted to know more... About Ichika.

“.....”

She ran the water in the shower for a while longer.



The next morning there was a short homeroom again. The impossible had happened.

“Well then, the representative for Class 1-A will be Orimura Ichika. Ah, it’s good we got this sorted out.” Ms. Yamada went on, happily.

The girls in the class also seemed very happy. I was the only one who made a gloomy face. The only damn one.

“Teach, I got a question.”

I raised my hand. That was the proper way to do it. The fundamental way.

“Yes, Orimura?”

“I lost the battle yesterday, yet now I’m class rep anyway. What gives?”

“Well...”

“I pulled out of the race!”

Cecilia had stood up and put her hands on her hips. It looked good, and — Okay, anyway. Why had she pulled out? And she looked kinda psyched about it, which didn’t really make sense to me. She’d been so angry until then, and now she looked positively happy? It was strange.

“Well, you did lose the battle, but that was really never in question. After all, your opponent was I, Cecilia Alcott! Nothing else could be expected.”

I had no words to say to that. I lost, after all.

“You see, I’m regretting that I was so childishly angry.”

—*You what?*

“I have decided to let you be the representative... Ichika. Combat experience trains an IS pilot like nothing else. It seems to me you need this experience more than I do.”

What a mixed blessing this was.

—*Did she just use my first name? Nah, can’t be.*

“You really get it, Cecilia!” someone cheered.

“Exactly! We’ve got the only man in the world who can pilot. We have to support him!”

“We’ll learn a lot of great things, and we can sell the info to the other classes. Orimura is the gift that keeps on giving!”

—*Hey, I don’t remember agreeing to becoming a commodity.*

“Alas!”

Cecilia cleared her throat and put a hand on her chin. This was a different pose from before. I wondered what it meant? It probably meant something, but I wasn't sure what.

"As you can see, I am a superior, elegant, beautiful— nay, perfect human being. If I teach you the ways of the IS, then surely success is just around the corner—"

Wham!

Houki slammed her hand on the table and stood up.

"Sadly, the position of Ichika's teacher is filled. He asked *me* to do it himself."

There was a strange amount of emphasis on the word "me." Houki glared with a rare level of hostility towards Cecilia.

—*You're going to freak her out if you look at her like that...*

A week ago Cecilia would have pulled back from the engagement, but not now. She answered Houki's gaze in kind. If anything, she looked a little prideful.

"Oh, aren't you the *C-ranked* Shinonono-girl? Is there anything you have to say to an A-rank like me?"

"Th-The rank doesn't matter! He asked me! I-Ichika said that it *has* to be me!"

That was a lie.

"Wait, you're Rank C, Houki?"

"The rank doesn't matter!"

She got really mad. I was Rank B, apparently. However, the rank was based on the training unit, and Chifuyu had told me not to pay it too much heed.

"Sit down, you idiots."

Chifuyu walked over to Cecilia and Houki and hit them both on the head. Of course Japan's former representative, and the first world champion, wasn't afraid of anything. Both of them sat down, saddened.

—*You could say, **satened**. Hahaha.*

Wham!

"Wipe that grin off your face, you idiot."

She was hitting us with the attendance record, by the way. I'm sure my sister Chifuyu didn't know it, but the binding of the record was quite hard. If my sister didn't, I certainly did.

"Your ranks are worth nothing. The way I see it, you're all green behind the ears. Like chicks inside the eggs; trying to break through, but still putting on airs."

I could see Cecilia wanted to say something back to Chifuyu, but she didn't.

"I told you all the National Cadets need to study just like everyone else. People say that teenagers have to be allowed their immature fights, but I'm the one in charge here, and I won't have that nonsense."

I never knew that Chifuyu was such a strict person at work. It surprised me. I'd only ever known her as the person who grumbled over too much salt in the soup. Now that I was living in the dorms, how was my sister getting by?

—I should visit her this weekend.

Was the place even occupied? Was she doing her laundry properly? I was always in charge of doing it for her. If only she would at least put her underwear into the laundry bags herself— they always ended up damaged when they found their way into the main laundry, and that would usually upset Chifuyu.

—At least do that much, Ms. Respectable Member of Society.

Wham!

"You were thinking about something rude, weren't you?"

"I-I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Uh-huh."

Wham! Bam!

"I'm sorry!"

"Good."

Virtuous citizens, subjected to endless abuse. What a cruel world we lived in.

"The class representative is Orimura Ichika. I believe there are no objections?"

The entire class yelled excitedly in agreement. The needs of the many always outweigh the needs of the few; I just wished it would take my side for once.

Chapter III: The Transfer Student Is a Second Childhood Friend

“Well, then. Orimura, Alcott, do some flying. Show me some basic IS flight maneuvers.”

We were in the last week of April by now. The last cherry blossoms had fallen. My sister Chifuyu was still a demon in class, but I was doing my best.

“Hurry up. A trained IS pilot only needs a second to generate their unit.”

I focused my mind as she egged me on. Once the IS was fitted to the pilot, they carried it around as an accessory. In Cecilia’s case, it was her left earring. In my case, it was a gauntlet for my right hand. Normally it was supposed to be some kind of simple item, so I had no idea why mine was an armored gauntlet, of all things.

“Focus.”

My impending doom— another hit from Chifuyu— was imminent. I stuck out my right arm and gripped the gauntlet with my left. I had played around with a bunch of different methods, and this was the one that let me focus my mind the best. The vision of my IS expanding filled my thoughts.

—Come to me, Byakushiki!

Immediately, I could feel a film spreading out over me from my right wrist. It took 0.7 seconds to encompass me. Bright particles of light flooded across my body, then seemed to harden out around me into the IS unit.

My body grew light. The IS sensors linked up to my consciousness, and my perception of the world became much sharper. Byakushiki had materialized in the blink of an eye, and now we were floating off the ground some 10 centimeters up. Cecilia and Blue Tears were also levitating. The bits I had destroyed in our battle had regrown.

“Okay. Now, fly.”

Cecilia acted immediately. She spun away into the sky and stopped, almost out of sight, above us. I followed, but my rate of climb was significantly slower than hers.

“What are you doing? Byakushiki should be much faster based on the specs.”

I was being remonstrated over the com-link. We’d learned about high-velocity rising and falling the day before. “Imagine a triangle pointing upwards” was what they had told us, but it was hard for me to put into practice.

“Ichika, having a good, solid mental image goes a long way. It might be more constructive to think of a better one that works for you.”

“Maybe... But I’m nowhere near used to flying yet. How does it manage to levitate, anyway?”

Byakushiki had two wing-shaped extrusions on the back, but no matter how I looked at them, they didn’t seem capable of making the suit fly.

Besides, it didn't matter where they were pointed; the unit could fly about regardless, so the whole thing was pretty mysterious.

"I don't mind explaining it to you, but it's not a short explanation. It uses anti-gravity wings and flow-wave interference."

"Flow... What? Fine, just don't explain it."

I turned her down immediately. I wasn't going to understand it anyway.

"I see. Too bad. Hehe."

Cecilia was smiling gleefully. It was an honest, simple smile, not an ironic or derisive one.

After our battle, Cecilia had been teaching me and giving tips whenever she could. I was really grateful for that, of course, and Cecilia was really good— as you'd expect of a National Cadet. But I did have to wonder: what had brought on this change of heart? I couldn't believe how different she'd been at first.

"Ichika, I will teach you again after school if you would like. Then we can be alone and—"

"Ichika! How long are you going to stay up there?! Come down!" came a yell via the com.

I looked over and saw that Houki had taken the radio from a shocked Ms. Yamada. The IS hypersensors incorporated long-distance telescopic sights and other vision enhancements; I could make out Houki's eyelashes from about 200 meters away.

—It'd definitely be possible to use this for all sorts of evil purposes...

"I should add that the sights are, technically, limited to a certain range. But the IS was designed for use in outer space, where it's necessary to determine your position based on stars hundreds of thousands of kilometers away, so distances this short are trivial."

Thanks, model student. She really knew a lot. In contrast to that, Houki's explanations went like:

"It goes, uhh... It goes dadum, and then bazoom!"

Not very helpful. I wasn't even sure if Houki could actually pilot an IS. We hadn't had any practical training yet as a group, so I had no idea how well Houki could fly. Cecilia always barged in during Houki's weird explanations, and the two of them ended up arguing a lot. Just as Cecilia had become friendlier with me, she'd become less friendly with Houki. It was kind of strange how that was.

"Orimura, Alcott, show me a rapid descent, then deactivate your units. Target altitude is ten centimeters."

"Roger. See you in a moment, Ichika."

Cecilia dropped from the sky like a stone. I looked after her disappearing unit and was mildly impressed.

"She's good..."

She'd already deactivated her unit without any problems.

—All right, time to follow her.

I focused my mind and pictured a roaring flame being ejected by the wing-shaped objects on my back, followed by the fire blasting me towards the ground.

Vrrrooom!

I arrived at the ground— or rather, crashed into it. The unit protected me from the G-forces and initial impact, but the laughter from my classmates still hurt my soul.

—Why didn't the IS protect my soul as well?!

"Moron. Did I tell you to bury yourself in the ground? Are you trying to dig a foxhole?"

"I'm sorry."

I used the altitude control system to levitate off the ground. Due to the IS shield barrier, there wasn't a speck of dust on Byakushiki.

"Pathetic, Ichika. Didn't I teach you this the other day?" Houki said, arms crossed and eyes narrowed.

—Taught it to me? If you could call all those weird sound effects teaching, then sure.

Houki was able to make jokes now. How times have changed.

"You're thinking something rude right now, aren't you?"

—Are my thoughts leaking out again somehow?

"Besides, Ichika. You're the kind of guy who always—"

Houki was starting to rail on about my failings, but she was interrupted.

"Are you all right, Ichika? Are you hurt?"

"N-Nah... I'm fine."

"Good. That's very good." Cecilia smiled.

Which poet was it who'd said the whims of girls were like the autumn sky? I wanted to smack him. To me, girls were way harder to predict than the weather.

"There's no way he'd get hurt when he's using the IS," protested Houki.

"Oh, Shinonono. Worrying about each other is the most natural thing. That goes for IS pilots as well. This is called 'common decency.'"

"Says you? You're trying really hard to look nice and innocent."

"Better than trying to look like a monster."

BzZzzZz.

I could see the sparks flying between them. I mean, there weren't physical sparks. But it had kinda looked like it... Maybe the IS hypersensors were capable of seeing this as well? That was kind of amazing, but also useless. Anyway, those two girls were becoming more and more hostile by the day.

"Hey, morons. You're in the way. Do this in a corner somewhere."

Chifuyu came up to me, pushing Houki and Cecilia away in the process.

"Orimura, bring out your weapon. You can do that yourself, right?"

"Y-Yeah..."

"The right answer to that is 'yes.'"

"Y-Yes."

"Good. Do it."

I turned sideways. I had to make sure nobody was standing in front of me, then I held out my right hand again and gripped it with my left.

I pictured a blade. A sharp, hard blade. A strong weapon...

—*Come!*

My left hand gripped my right wrist even tighter. When my concentration had reached its peak, light gathered in my palm, congealed, and then took shape. When the light had hardened out, my hand was holding the Yukihiro Nigata.

—*Good. I can bring it out whenever I want now.*

It was hard to do this reliably at first. It wasn't like they taught you how to materialize a sword in your hand in school.

"Too slow. You have to do this in 500 milliseconds."

Argh. She found fault with everything! I never got any praise. I'd worked at this for a week straight and I was pretty proud of it.

"Cecilia, bring out your weapon."

"Roger."

She raised her hand to shoulder level and held it to the side. There was a burst of light, much faster than the swirl I had produced. And with that, she was holding her rifle in her hand: the Starlight Mk. III. I was nowhere near as fast as her. What's more, there was already a magazine in the gun, which Cecilia could disengage the safety of just by glancing at it. It took her perhaps a second to bring out the gun and make it ready to fire.

"Good work, National Cadet, but stop using that pose; the gun is aimed sideways when you bring it out. You could hit someone. Learn to bring it out in front."

"B-But for my image, I need—"

"Change it. Got it?"

"Yes..."

Cecilia looked like she wanted to talk back, but Chifuyu glared at her and the discussion was over. She would make a good soldier in the future.

"Cecilia, bring out your close-combat weapon."

"Uh... Oh, r-roger!"

Cecilia had probably been grumbling in her mind, and it had startled her that the conversation had continued. Her weapon dissolved into light again, and instead, she brought out her close-combat weapon. Or rather, she was supposed to. The light swirled around a little, then stagnated in the air.

"Ngh..."

"How much longer?"

"S-Soon. Goodness gracious! 'Interceptor!'" she yelled out the name in frustration.

Finally, the light took shape as a weapon. However, we were supposed to bring out our weapons without using this beginner method. Having failed at this was humiliating for Cecilia, the National Cadet.

"That took several seconds. Is your enemy in battle going to wait that long?"

"I-I wouldn't let them get close in a real battle! It won't be a problem!"

"Really? Even Orimura managed to get close to you, and he's a total beginner."

"Th-That's because..."

Cecilia had nothing more to add. She was clearly flustered. I looked at all this without any ill will when suddenly she stared at me. Suddenly I heard her over an encrypted, private channel.

"This is your fault!"

—*Why? What did I do?*

"Y-You flew into my close-combat range!"

—*Yeah, well, I have a close-combat IS.*

"Y-You will have to take responsibility for this!"

—*What kind of responsibility...?*

I never actually responded. It was a purely one-way communication. I didn't really understand how to produce the right mental image for the private channel, anyway. They'd told us to imagine talking with the back right-hand side of our brain, which made no sense to me.

"Time's up. That's the end of the lesson for today. Orimura, clean up the grounds."

She probably wanted me to fill the hole. Where did they keep the dirt again?

I looked over at Houki. She looked away from me and pouted; she wasn't going to help me. And Cecilia was... already gone.

—*Fine. I didn't want any help anyway.*

Besides, this was the kind of stuff that men had to do. Making the girls do physical work would have been pretty disgraceful for me. Plus, the hole was my fault to begin with. Mastering the IS was clearly going to take a while longer.



"Hmph. Looks like this is the place."

It was night. A girl of slender frame was standing in front of the gate to the IS Academy, carrying an almost comically large travel bag. Her hair was tied into two ponytails, left and right, that fluttered in the mild April breeze. The ponytails were a brilliant black and tied with good-looking golden clasps, and fell around her shoulders.

"So where's the reception again?"

She took a piece of paper from her pocket. The paper was completely crumpled; it perfectly encapsulated her seemingly haphazard, happy-go-lucky personality.

"School Building, First Floor, General Reception... So where the hell is it?"

The scrap of paper didn't answer her complaints. The girl grimaced and buried the paper in her jacket again. It made an audible crunch as it was crumpled inside.

"Fine, I'll look for it myself. Can't rely on anyone, apparently!"

Grumbling, she walked away; it was better to act than to think. She was that kind of girl. A well-meaning observer would have called her practical. A derisive observer would have called her unthinking.

—Really? Not even a single person to say hello? I can't believe they would just toss me out here with nothing else to go off of!

The girl looked somewhat Japanese, but on closer inspection, she clearly wasn't. Her eyes were just as angled as theirs, but somehow looked more elegant and regal. The girl was obviously Chinese. Japan was like a second home to her. She had lived in the country for a long time, and had many friends there. As they say: History is about the people, not the places.

—There's really nobody here, huh? No students, no teachers, or anyone to guide me around...

She wandered around the buildings, looking for any semblance of a person. It was a little past eight, and all the lecture and administration buildings were dark. All of the students were in their dorms.

—Oh my God, this pisses me off... Maybe I should fly up and around to take a look?

"On second thought... Maybe that's not such a good idea... The last thing I need is a bunch of people in suits getting mad at me again. The people back home thought as much too, the pathetic fools."

—Hmph. Well, I'm just too important, aren't I? I've gotta be careful.

She liked it when people several times her age came to implore her to do something. She'd always hated old people who thought they deserved respect just because they were older. As far as she saw it, the world was in great shape.

"Male brawns are irrelevant! A girl's IS is justice!"

She was feeling great. When she'd been a little girl, she'd hated boys who thought they had the right to decide just because they were boys. There was just one guy who'd been different; she remembered him pretty well. Her memories of that boy were the main reason she'd wanted to return to Japan.

—I wonder how he's doing now... Probably well enough, aha.

"That's wh... said..." came a mysterious voice.

She looked around. The voice seemed to be coming from an IS training building. IS-related buildings in all countries look similar, so she recognized it immediately.

—Perfect, I can ask them where the heck I'm supposed to go!

She ran towards the arena entrance.

"Like I said, I don't know how to picture that," said a male voice.

The male voice took her by surprise and she stopped in her tracks, startled.

—Is that who I— No, it can't be. Is it really him? What's he doing here?!
The girl's eyes widened with curiosity and anticipation.

—What if he doesn't recognize me?! N-No, wait. I'm sure he will. He has to! I-If he doesn't, it's only because I've grown so beautiful!

After a brief pause the girl continued to walk towards the building.

"Ichi—" she whispered.

—Oh, no! What's up with my voice? Come on, just say it normally!

"Ichika, when are you going to get a handle on your mental image? We've been stuck on the same problem for a week," said the female voice.

"Look, your explanations are just really confusing. What the hell is 'djoom?'"

"It's... Djoom."

"I don't even know what that means! Wait, where are you going, Houki?!"

The man ran after the unknown girl, who then quickened her step.

—Who the hell is that? And why do they seem so buddy-buddy?!

Her excitement had disappeared, blown away by the wind. She felt a stinging anger blowing over her soul like a snowstorm.

Soon after, she found the general reception. The school building was just behind the arena. Some of the lights were still on, as well.

"I think that should be all of the paperwork. Welcome to the IS Academy, Huang Lingyin."

The clerk was friendly, but her words hardly reached the girl. The girl—Lingyin, that is— was in a visibly bad mood when she talked.

"In which class is Orimura Ichika?"

"Oh, the boy they're all talking about? Class A. You're in Class B, Huang, but your rooms are right next to each other. Hey, I heard they even made him the class representative. I suppose he takes after his sister."

All women loved gossip. Lingyin coldly regarded the clerk, who was living proof of said gossip, and continued.

"Does Class B have a rep yet?"

"Yes, they do."

"What's her name?"

"Uh... Um... Why do you need that?"

Perhaps the clerk had felt that something with Lingyin's behavior was off, and she hesitated to answer.

"I wanted to ask them *nicely* to give it to me."

Lingyin smiled in the most threatening way possible.

◇

"So! Congratulations to Orimura for becoming the class representative!"

"Congratulations!"

Clap, clap, clap.

Someone had fired off hand-held fireworks, and the bright paper threads fell on my head. Their weight was light on my head, but heavy on my soul.

By the way, it was after school. We had the time off. Everyone in Class A was gathered in the dorm cafeteria. All of us were drinking something. It was quite a spectacle.

“.....”

—*Man, screw this. Why are we even having a party?*

I looked over at the wall. There was a gigantic wall scroll inscribed with “Orimura Ichika Class Rep Inauguration Party.”

—*An inauguration party? Really?*

“This will make the class league battles really awesome,” said one of the attendees.

“Totally.”

“We’re so lucky that we ended up in the same class as him!”

“Yeah, same.”

I could have sworn that the girl giving noncommittal answers was from Class B. Besides, there were clearly more than 30 girls around. It was a class meeting, and yet there were more girls than our class even had.

“You’re popular, Ichika,” Houki snorted.

“You really think so?”

“Hmph.”

Houki went back to consuming her tea. Why was she in such a bad mood?

“Hello, hello! We’re from the newspaper club! We’ve come to get a special interview with the new student everyone is talking about, Orimura Ichika!”

There were impressed murmurs. The girls acted like impressionable chickens.

—*Chicks. Teehee.*

“Oh, hello, my name is Mayuzumi Kaoruko, second year. I’m the vice president of the newspaper club. Here’s my business card.”

I took the card and looked at the name; the characters used to write her name were freakishly complex. I couldn’t imagine she liked writing it out by hand.

“Well then, well then, Orimura! How does it feel to be class representative?”

She stuck a microphone under my nose to record my answer and looked at me with puppy eyes.

“Um...”

I was really, really not feeling like I wanted to answer that, but I also didn’t want to let them down. That’s what you get for being Japanese, I guess.

“Well, you know, I’m gonna do my best.”

“Aw... Do you have anything more to add to that? Like, ‘touch me and you’ll get burned,’ or something?”

—*What the heck does that mean? Do people even say that sort of thing anymore?*

"The team deserves all the credit."

"Whoa, that's so old-fashioned!"

Was she trying to insult Japan's famous athletes who talked like that?

"Okay, it's fine. I'll just edit the audio to something better."

That really wasn't fine. This was how the modern mass media forced their biased views on us. Truly horrible.

"Oh, Cecilia. Please offer a comment as well."

"Ordinarily I dislike giving comments to the press, but all right," responded Cecilia.

She didn't look at all like she disliked it. In fact, she'd been hanging around near me and the newspaper girls for a while. I could swear that her hair looked even more elaborate than usual. Maybe she was expecting her picture to be taken?

"Ahem. Well then, let me begin by elaborating on my withdrawal from running for class representative and—"

"Oh, that sounds way too long. We'll just take your picture," Mayuzumi interjected.

"L-Listen to all of it!"

"Don't worry, I'll just make up something cool. Okay, let's write that you fell in love with Orimura."

"Wh-Wh-Wha—"

Cecilia turned very red. She must have been very angry. I decided to provide fire support from the trenches.

"Don't be ridiculous!" I said.

"Really? Are you sure?"

"E-Exactly! Are you trying to make fun of me?!"

—*What? Why is Cecilia angry at me now? I just want this to be over.*

"B-Besides, you—"

"Okay, okay. Stand side by side now. I'll take a picture," said Mayuzumi, cutting Cecilia off again.

"Wh..."

Cecilia sounded surprised. However, when I listened carefully, she also sounded a little happy and excited.

"You two have those famous personal units. I need a photo of you two together. Oh! You should shake hands, I think."

"R-Really...? Okay..."

Cecilia became fidgety and glanced over at me. She looked like someone who thought their big chance had come, but who didn't want to look easy.

"Um, we may have copies of the photos you take, right?" asked Cecilia.

"Well, of course."

"Then I would like to change into—"

"No way. That takes too long. Stand side by side now."

Mayuzumi took my hand and Cecilia's and made us shake hands. She was a pretty pushy girl.

"....."

"Something wrong?"

"N-No. Nothing is wrong."

Cecilia had been staring at me very intently. I wasn't sure whether or not she wanted to talk to me about something? Apparently not. It was so hard to understand her signals.

"....."

"What is it, Houki?"

"Nothing."

She too had been staring at me very intently. It was hard to understand her signs— You know how it goes.

"Taking the picture now! What's 35 times 51, divided by 24?"

"Uh... Um... two?"

"Nope, it's 74.375!"

—*What the hell?*

I heard the snapping sound of a digital camera's shutter. And... Wait.

"Why are you all in the photo?"

With frightful alacrity, the entirety of Class A had managed to squeeze into the picture around me and Cecilia. Even Houki was there. What the hell were they trying to do?

"Y-You girls!" Cecilia cried.

"Come on."

"We can't let you steal a march on us, Cecilia!"

"This is going to be a nice memento."

"Right?"

All of them were trying to placate Cecilia. I didn't understand.

"Ugh..."

Cecilia was looking around bitterly, while her classmates beamed back. I couldn't understand: what was going on?

Anyway, the entire "Orimura Ichika Class Rep Inauguration Party" went well past 10PM. I'd honestly underestimated the girls' energy. By the time I realized how late it was, night had come, and I went to my room feeling very exhausted. I promptly collapsed on my bed.

"It must have been fun for you today. How nice."

—*What's with that sarcastic tone, Houki? Are you trying to pick a fight or something?*

"Wha... I'm just super tired. How is that fun? Would you like this if you were me?"

"Hm... I guess... Yeah, maybe."

She and I both knew that wasn't true, but Houki would rather detonate a rhetorical suicide vest than admit that she was even slightly wrong. I figured it was best to just end the discussion there. Debating it would just make it worse.

"M'kay. I'm gonna sleep."

"Wh-What? It's only half past ten."

"I'm tired. When you're tired, you sleep."

I was worming my way into the sheets when a pillow hit me.

"Ngh... What the hell are you doing?!"

"Th-That's my line! I'm going to change into my nightwear now, so face the other way!"

We'd been living together for a week and she always changed into her nightwear when I was around. She could just do it when I was brushing my teeth, but no. That's what I did myself, though.

"Hey, Houki. I asked you before, but why don't you change when I'm not —"

Blam!

"Fine. I'll face the other way."

Girls were just a mystery. Anyway, I rolled over and faced the other way.

"....."

"....."

I hated this sort of awkward silence. Time seemed to stretch forever, and even the tiniest noises were weirdly prominent. I was a healthy 15-year-old boy. It made me restless. I heard her take off her shirt. I was suddenly reminded of how she'd looked when she'd come out of the shower. It made me even more restless. After a while of clothes rustling suggestively, I was wide awake and no longer felt like sleeping.

"Y-You can turn."

I rolled back over. I didn't really have to turn back around, but when I'd brought that up before it had made Houki angry.

"Oh... Do you have a new sash?"

Houki wore a yukata at night: so Japanese. I liked that. Anyway, the sash she was wearing was different. I pointed this out to her.

"Y-You noticed..."

Uh-huh... Her thorny attitude had completely disappeared. In fact, she looked kind of happy? It was so weird.

"Well, it's got a different color and a different pattern, so of course I'd notice. I look at you every day, Houki."

"R-Right... You look at me every day... Right..."

She looked very happy and nodded to herself.

"All right! Time to sleep!"

Being excited to sleep was pretty weird to me. Houki snuck into her own sheets and turned off the lights. The room was silent.

—Hmph... Now I'm not sleepy anymore.

Drowsiness came in waves and missing a wave forced you to wait for the next. Maybe that was just me, though.

"Ichika..."

"Yeah?"

"A-About earlier... Um... I'm sorry."

What was she talking about? I had no idea.

"It's fine. I don't mind."

"I-I see... That's good. Good night, then."

"Sure. Good night."

I was feeling a little drowsy again and decided I wasn't going to let this wave slip away. I dreamt of the past that night, for whatever reason.



"Good morning, Orimura! Did you hear? We're getting a transfer student."

It was morning. As soon as I sat down, classmates crowded around me. I viewed it as a huge step forward that in the weeks since school began, I'd become able to talk somewhat normally with the girls. Being all alone in class was really boring, after all.

"A transfer student? This time of the year?"

It was still April. Why hadn't she enrolled normally? Besides, the IS Academy had very strict rules regarding transfer students: they had to pass the entrance exams, of course, but they also needed the backing of their country. Which meant that the new student was...

"Yeah, she's the National Cadet from China."

"I see."

Speaking of National Cadets.

"Oh, perhaps she was in fear of my presence here?"

There we had the British National Cadet, Cecilia Alcott. She had her hands on her hips again, striking a great pose. Maybe all British people had a gene that made them look good with their hands on their hips?

"She's not going to be in our class, right? What's the big deal?"

Houki was suddenly at my side even though I'd seen her go to her seat by the window. Perhaps this meant that Houki had a girly streak after all and craved the latest gossip.

"I wonder what she's like?"

Given that she was a National Cadet, her skills were probably very good, and she was also probably like Cecilia. I was a bit tired of girls with a lot of pride, frankly. Then again, another class would have to deal with that.

"Hm... Are you curious?" Houki asked me.

"Me? A little, I guess."

"Hmph..."

She frowned at my response. I answered honestly, but somehow this put Houki into a bad mood. Her moods were swinging so wildly lately; I was amazed it didn't wear her out. Maybe she was emotionally unstable? It happened a lot with teenage girls.

"Do you really have the time to think about girls? You've got the class league match coming up next month."

"Yes! That's right, Ichika. We need to do more combat practice to prepare you for the class league match. I, Cecilia Alcott, shall be generous and act as your sparring partner. I am, after all, the *only* one with a personal unit in this class besides you."

She emphasized the word "only." Not that she was wrong. The others would have to wait a day to get approval for a training unit and equipment,

so training with Cecilia was way more convenient. The class league matches were carried out between the class representatives; apparently, they wanted to get a sense of our skill level before practice started. Additionally, it was thought to promote class cohesion and inter-class relations. To get people motivated, the best class was given a trophy and half a year of free desserts. Girls loved dessert.

"Well, I'll do what I can."

"That is unacceptable, Ichika! You must win!"

"Yeah! Are you a man or some invertebrate?"

"We'll all be happy if you win, Orimura."

Cecilia, Houki, and the other classmates all egged me on. Sadly my IS piloting skills hadn't improved all that much over the previous days, so I wasn't brimming with confidence. When I piloted it the first time, it felt really intuitive... But that feeling of being one with the unit, of being reborn, was gone. Still, I had gotten more used to piloting because Byakushiki was adapting to my personality... Apparently.

A few more girls had come up to me, and now I was surrounded by them. This was a regular occurrence by now, so I was used to it. It never stopped surprising me how much girls loved gossip. I couldn't keep up with it.

"Good luck, Orimura."

"We want the free dessert!"

"You've got a fair shot because only the class reps of A and D have personal units."

I grunted. That was the most I was able to say without ruining the girls' optimism.

"That intel is outdated!"

There was chatter at the class entrance. I knew damn well whose voice that was.

"Class B also has a rep with their personal unit now. You won't have such an easy time winning."

A girl was standing in the doorway, arms crossed.

"Rin? Is that you?"

"Yep. I'm China's National Cadet, Huang Lingyin. I've come here today to declare war!"

She smiled thinly, and her trademark pigtails shook slightly.

"Trying to look cool, huh? Doesn't suit you."

"Wh... Are you trying to wind me up or something?!"

Finally, she was talking normally. What was up with that pompous speech earlier? Couldn't say I was a fan of it.

"Hey."

"What?!"

Wham!

Rin was hit square on the head with the attendance record for her impudence. Our demonic teacher had arrived.

"Short homeroom has started. Go back to your class."

"C-Chifuyu..."

"Call me Orimura here. Now go back and don't stand in the doorway. You're blocking it."

"I-I'm sorry..."

Rin moved out of the doorway. You could tell she was more than a little scared of Chifuyu. She'd never been good at handling her.

"I'll be back! Don't run away, Ichika!"

—*Why would I have run away?*

"I said go back," barked Chifuyu.

"O-Okay."

She ran away towards Class B. Yep, that was Rin for you.

—*Why is she here, though? To show off? Or maybe she wants to reinvent herself for high school? Pretty typical of her, I would say.*

"Wow, I didn't know she was an IS pilot. First time I heard about that," I blurted out.

That was a mistake.

"Ichika, who was that? Someone you know? You looked like you knew each other."

"I-Ichika! How do you know that girl?"

The other girls in the class fired away with all their guns as well.

—*Great. Just great.*

Wham! Wham! Wham!

"Sit down, you idiots!"

Chifuyu's attendance record silenced the gunfire. Was it my fault? It was my fault.

—*Hm... But why is another of my old friends here? Life is so strange.*

Another day of studying the IS had begun.

◇

—*Who was that girl... She and Ichika looked close.*

It was no use. I couldn't focus on class after what had happened this morning.

—*And it looked like Ichika and her are...*

Argh. For whatever reason I couldn't let the thought of them two go.

—*I'm his childhood friend!*

I turned to Ichika, who was diligently taking notes. How was he still so calm after all that had happened today already?

—*Grr, because of him I can't focus on class!*

"....."

I should count my blessings. Whoever that girl may be to Ichika, I was the one who was actually living with him. If I wanted to be alone with him, there were plenty of opportunities.

—*He's hopeless without me. I guess I'll teach him more about the IS.*

Yeah. That was all I had to do. It was only natural that I would be the one closest to Ichika.

—*We'll train together after school again.*

No one could get between the bond I shared with Ichika, that much was certain.

"Shinonono, what's the answer?"

"Wh-What?!"

—*Oh crap. What were we learning about again...?*

I had gotten so lost in thought that I forgot we were still in class. And our teacher wasn't Ms. Yamada, it was Ms. Orimura.

"What's the answer?"

"I-I wasn't listening..."

Bam!

The attendance record struck again.



"....."

In the back of the classroom, Cecilia's pencil was running across the pages. However, the lines on the page would have made no sense to anyone. They weren't even real letters.

—*Who was that earlier?!*

She'd hated how friendly the girl had been with Ichika. It frustrated her so much! She was already engaged in a bitter battle with Houki. She didn't want another combatant. And out of all of them, the girl earlier had seemed the closest to Ichika. She felt like a marathon runner who was overtaken at the halfway point by a completely fresh runner.

—*This isn't right! Fight me fair and square!*

She didn't know what fair and square would have meant between people, but that was her opinion, anyway. She was confident that she could easily win in any fair competition, but she'd never competed for a man before, so things weren't going as she wanted. Cecilia was waking up to painful reality.

—*And she's a National Cadet...*

There were 20 or so National Cadets enrolled at IS Academy. However, as far as she knew, of those 20, only four were first year students. And, barring Ichika, only two in the grade had personal units. In this case, the situation looked very good for her, but...

—*She said she has a personal unit, too...*

It wasn't going well. In fact, it was going badly. Her trump card wasn't worth much anymore because the new girl had smuggled her own cards into the game.

—*S-She's cheating!*

It was too late for her to complain. She had to regain the initiative. Perhaps by doing something so daring it would give her a decisive lead over Houki and Rin?

—*Mock IS battles with him won't be enough. I need something bigger.*

"Alcott."

"I could ask for a date. No, it needs to be even more effective..."

"....."

Wham! Her fluffy blond hair was flattened by the attendance record.



“IT’S YOUR FAULT!”

During lunch break, Houki and Cecilia aired their complaints to me.

“But why...?” I pleaded.

In the morning, they had been told off five times by Ms. Yamada, and whacked on the head three times by Chifuyu. Apparently they weren’t learning from it. Spacing out in front of Chifuyu was like rubbing barbecue sauce on your body and dancing in front of a hungry tiger: you were basically asking for it.

“All right, I’ll hear you girls out, but I want to hit up the cafeteria. We can do this over some food.”

“Hmm... F-Fine. If that’s what you want,” said Houki.

“A-Alright. I suppose I shall accompany you if I must,” replied Cecilia.

—*Yes, yes. Thank you very much.*

A few others from our class followed us to the cafeteria. I bought a ticket for the daily special from the machine. It was a cheap way to eat something different every day. What greater blessing was there in the world? Houki took udon with fried tofu, and Cecilia picked the Western lunch option. As always, I wanted to tell them to try some new things, but then again, I wasn’t really one to talk.

“I was waiting for you, Ichika!”

Huang Lingyin popped out in front of us and blocked our path. Personally, I shortened her name to Ling, or rather, Rin. She was still how I remembered her. Her hair had always been in those long pigtails. I guess it wasn’t just Houki who I recognized instantly because of her hairstyle. I was weirdly proud of myself for having connected this common feature between my childhood friends.



"Well, just move out of the way for now. We want to hand in the meal tickets, and you're blocking traffic."

"S-Shut up! I know!"

She was carrying a tray with a bowl of ramen.

"The noodles are getting cold."

"I-I know! I was waiting for you! Why didn't you come sooner?!"

—*Why would I? It's not like I'm psychic...*

I recalled that she'd always been a bit annoying, as I handed in my food ticket.

"It's been a while, huh? Almost a year to be exact. You been doing well?" I asked.

"Y-Yeah. Why aren't you sick or hurt more often either?"

"Are you really hoping for that from me?"

All the girls around me were crazy. Was I some kind of magnet for weird and aggressive girls? Perhaps my own flaws brought it on; nobody's perfect.

"Ahem! Ahem!"

"Yes, yes, yes! Ichika! Your meal is ready."

The discussion was interrupted by Houki coughing in a comically loud fashion and Cecilia talking to me. Ah, the daily special was grilled mackerel. Just the sight of it made me more hungry.

"The table over there is empty. Let's go," I said to everyone present.

Just herding a group of 10 girls around was time consuming. The fact that we were able to find a table with as many people as we had was a blessing.

"Rin, when did you come back to Japan? Is your mother doing well? When did you become a National Cadet?"

"So many questions! I've got some too. How come you can use an IS? I saw it on the news."

We hadn't seen each other in a year, so I asked a lot more questions than I normally would've. When catching up with an old childhood friend, you wanted to know what they were doing in the meantime. It was the same with Houki.

"Ichika, I'd really like some explanation how you know this girl."

"Yes! Ichika, she's not your girlfriend, is she?!"

Perhaps Houki and Cecilia were feeling left out? They had started to heckle me. The other girls that had tagged along also nodded with curiosity.

"I-I-I'm not his gi—"

"Yeah. What are you talking about? She's just a childhood friend," I commented.

"....."

"Why're you staring at me?"

"Forget it!"

Rin was angry for some reason. What a weird girl.

"Childhood friend?" asked Houki, with a puzzled look.

"Um... Yeah... Remember how your family moved away in fourth grade? Rin moved here at the beginning of fifth grade. Then in eighth grade she moved back to China, so I haven't seen her for a year."

I remembered that Houki and Rin hadn't actually met before. They'd barely missed each other.

"Here, Rin, this is Houki. Didn't I tell you about her before? I went to school with her in grade school. She practiced kendo with me."

"Uh-hum. Okay."

Rin stared at Houki. Houki, being Houki, stared back just as intently.

"Nice to meet you. I hope we can get along."

"Yeah. Same."

They exchanged greetings in a friendly enough fashion, but it looked like sparks were flying between them. I had to get more rest. Perhaps the exhaustion was playing tricks on my mind. I remembered seeing a French CEO on TV once who'd said the greatest fault of the Japanese was not knowing how to relax. Guess I proved that right. Maybe I was just flat-out going to die if I kept that mentality going into the workforce.

"Hey! Don't forget me! You're the Chinese National Cadet, Huang Lingyin?" Cecilia butted in.

"Who're you?"

"Wh—?! I-I'm the British National Cadet, Cecilia Alcott! You've never heard of me?!"

"Nope. I don't care about other countries."

"Wh-Wh-Wh..."

Cecilia was stunned into silence, but began to turn red with anger. She looked like a lobster. If I'd told her that, she would have been angry at me too, so I didn't.

"J-J-Just so you know! I would never lose to someone like you!"

"Okay. But if we fight, I'll win. I'm really good," giggled Rin.

Yep, she hadn't changed. She was so full of confidence, and when she talked about it, it wasn't even malicious. She was just being honest. That was just what she believed. Whether or not it was malicious on her part didn't always matter, of course. Some people get upset anyway.

"....."

"Y-You're talking big, aren't you?"

Houki had stopped eating. Cecilia was trembling with anger, and her fists were clenched. Rin, on the other hand, was calmly eating her ramen. Acting like she wouldn't hurt a fly...

—*Though, more than that was hurt just now. Aha.*

"Ichika."

Whoops. Had she read my thoughts? Then again I felt it was unfair that people got angry at me just for having some idle thoughts. I was pretty sure it wasn't fair. Maybe.

"You're the class rep?"

"Oh, yeah. It just kinda turned out that way."

"Is that so..."

Rin raised the bowl to her lips and drank the broth. She never used the Chinese spoon she was given for that. She said it was too girly for her, despite being a girl herself.

"U-Um, I wouldn't mind looking at your piloting."

Her face was turned away from me; only her eyes were aimed in my direction, and the way she talked was unusually inarticulate.

"That sounds g—"

Bam! Two people slammed their hands on the table.

Both Houki and Cecilia had risen to their feet.

"It's my job to teach Ichika. He asked me to do it," protested Houki.

"You're in Class B, right? We don't want alms from the enemy!" exclaimed Cecilia.

Both of them looked really angry. The class league match must have been serious business to them. I decided that they might be right.

"I'm talking to Ichika right now. You girls have nothing to do with this, so stay out."

"Th-This is our business, too. Ichika personally asked *me* to teach him. He wanted me!"

Houki was emphasizing the word "me" again. That was a bit of an exaggeration, but we had gone over that already. It was all too important to her, for some reason.

"He's the representative of Class A, and so someone from Class A will teach him. Besides, how dare you crawl out of the woodwork to display your shameless persona—"

"I'm not crawling out of the woodwork. I've known him for longer than you," Rin interjected.

"Th-Then I've known him the longest! And Ichika ate with our family many times. That has to count for something!" cried Houki.

"He ate with my family too. Big deal."

This was true. Rin's family had a Chinese restaurant. Whenever Chifuyu had been home, I'd cooked for us, but back then she'd already become an IS pilot, so she returned home infrequently. It wasn't really worth it to cook for myself. Usually, I just prepared some instant food when I was alone. But, you know, instant food tastes like ash and isn't good for your health. At some point I decided to go to a restaurant nearby that offered daily specials, and it just so happened that Rin's family restaurant was the cheapest. The food was really good, so I found myself going there four or five times a week. I ended up hanging out with Rin quite a lot back then. At first we didn't really get along because of how her personality is, but it got a lot better as time went on.

—It was the same with Houki, wasn't it? I never get along with them at first, huh? No doubt this was also my fault somehow. And Cecilia too, actually!

"I-Ichika! What's going on?! You never told me about that!"

"Yes! You didn't tell me either! Ichika, I request an adequate explanation!"

"An explanation, huh? We were friends and I went to her family's restaurant to eat," I said.

That was just the truth, but for some reason Rin now frowned. Houki and Cecilia, on the other hand, looked relieved.

"Wh-What? A restaurant?"

"Oh, I see. Well, eating at a restaurant is perfectly normal, isn't it?"

All the other girls around us were going through the same phases of tension and relief. It was almost as if Chifuyu had passed by and put everyone on edge for a minute.

"Is your Pops doing well, Rin? The viruses are probably more scared of him than the other way around."

"Oh... Yeah, he's doing well... I think."

Rin looked distant for a moment, and I could feel that something was wrong.

"A-Anyway, do you have time after school today? Surely you do. Let's hang out. Remember that restaurant by the station?"

"Oh, they went under last year," I replied.

"I-I see... W-We can grab something to eat in the cafeteria if you want. We've got a lot to talk about."

—Do we? There's not much, really.

I'd been studying a lot the previous year, so there wasn't really anything to tell her.

"Sorry, but Ichika has to do IS training with me. He's got no time after school," Houki butted in.

—You don't get to decide that, Houki.

Couldn't I plan my own free time? They were just making fun of me now.

"Yes. We have the class league match coming up and he needs to train more. Did I mention I have a personal unit? You could say that I'm indispensable for the success of his training."

Houki and Cecilia had mounted a desperate counterattack over my after-school training, and it looked like it was working out. Thrown under the bus, at the expense of my free time. I was grateful for the help, but, you know, people want certain procedures to be observed. I wanted them to at least ask me before deciding these things. Life was a sequence of polite rituals, after all.

"Okay, I'll be there when that's over. Make sure you got time. Bye, Ichika!"

Rin drained the last bit of ramen broth and disappeared without waiting for an answer from me. She didn't come back, either. I saw her leave the cafeteria.

—Now I'll have to wait for her, huh? She didn't even let me reply...

"Ichika, your training takes priority."

"Ichika, don't forget that you will be taking up our highly valuable time as well."

I couldn't turn down either of those two either. I was eternally suffering.
—*Sigh...*



"Huh?"

We were in the third arena, after school. I was supposed to spar with Cecilia there, but an unexpected newcomer surprised me.

"Wh-Why are you looking at me like that? Is this weird?"

"I wouldn't say it's weird, but..."

"Shinonono?! Wh-Why are you here?"

Yes. Houki was standing in front of me and Cecilia. What's more, she was deployed in the IS unit, Uchigane. Uchigane was a well-regarded, domestically mass-produced second-generation IS unit. It had a balanced performance ratio, which made it well-suited to new pilots. A lot of companies and countries used the model, and it was the most common training unit at the IS Academy, or so the textbook said.



"Ichika asked me to train him, right?"

—*Uh, sure... I guess...*

"Besides, he's not getting enough close-combat experience. It's my turn to spar."

Uchigane's design looked much like a samurai in armor, and its baseline weapons were katana-shaped close-combat blades. It really fit Houki, and reminded me of movies like *The Last Samurai*.

"Hmmm."

Whoops. I was being glared at.

"Tch... Who would have thought the school would hand out training unit permits so easily..."

Cecilia looked weirdly upset. It made no sense to me.

"Ichika. Let's start. Draw your sword."

"O-Okay..."

She looked motivated. Houki already had her sword out. It had a dull metal color, with a sharp glimmer across the blade. I wouldn't say it freaked me out, but I was feeling a little nervous.

"Okay... En garde!" Houki yelled.

"Wait! I, Cecilia Alcott, am supposed to be fighting Ichika!"

Before we could duel, Cecilia went between me and Houki.

"Out of the way! I will cut you down!" exclaimed Houki.

"Don't think a training unit can beat me!"

Houki made a diagonal cut downwards from the shoulder. Cecilia had brought out her shortsword, Interceptor, and blocked Houki's strike. She used the force of the impact to gain distance and pulled the trigger of her Starlight Mk. III with one hand. They were really fighting.

—*What about my practice...*

"HAH!"

"Too easy!"

I decided to wait for a result. They both looked positively vicious, and I wasn't going to get myself hit by trying to intervene.

"Ichika!"

"Why are you just watching this?!"

"Uh... It doesn't matter who I side with, the other is going to be angry, right?"

"OF COURSE!" they said in unison.

Then what were they expecting me to do? And it was really weird how Houki and Cecilia had the same opinion sometimes. I really wanted to know what was going on. Apparently my prolonged silence wasn't going down too well, either. A few minutes later I was deeply embroiled in a battle against two IS units. It was enough to give me PTSD. These two were out to get me.



"Well then, let us end it here for the day."

"S-Sure..."

I was totally out of breath, but Cecilia looked relaxed. National Cadets were just on another level. She had the advantage in experience.

"Hmph. You're out of shape."

Houki looked a little exhausted, but not nearly as worn out as I was. I mean, they'd ganged up on me, really. Goddamn fiends.

I looked at the thin layer of sweat on Houki's skin. It was strangely appealing to see her like that, and my heart beat a little faster. Just a little, though. Like a really tiny bit faster.

"What are you doing? Go back into the pit."

"O-Okay... Hey, Houki. Why are you following me?"

"I have to go back into the pit, too."

"But Cecilia went over there to—"

"D-Does it matter which pit I take?"

I guess not. She could have just gone to Cecilia, though. I decided to ignore this weird exchange and headed into the building.

"Hm..."

We dissolved our IS units. I immediately felt much more exhausted because the IS was no longer supporting my body. Houki also dissolved her unit and readjusted her hair, which glistened with sweat.

"Too much of what you do is pointless. That's what why you're so exhausted. You have to use less complex movements."

That was the first thing she said down in the pit. I almost cried at the kindness my childhood friend was showing me.

—At least hand me a towel or something, Houki. Come on.

Cecilia had gone into the opposite pit, so I was alone with Houki now. All I wanted to do was take a shower. The closest shower rooms were in the club building, but that was just opposite of the dorms, so there was no point in going there. And again, there were no shower rooms for boys, so I'd have to use the same one as the girls. I didn't mind seeing their underwear, but seeing them being naked would have been a different matter. I really didn't want to go there. It just seemed like it would give rise to all sorts of problems. And even if I tried to do it, I was pretty sure Chifuyu or Houki would execute me on the spot. I figured now I'd have to add Cecilia to my mental list of possible murderers; her name was glowing since it was a recent entry.

"Houki, can I ask you something..."

"What is it?"

"Can you let me use the shower first today? Erm, besides, what about the kendo club? If you practice with me every day the other girls will beat you eventually."

"Y-You don't have to worry about that. Girls are about to beat me at a lot of other things."

"Uh... Like what?"

"F-Forget it!"

I was just trying to be polite, but apparently I had struck a nerve. I decided to ignore it.

"So, about the shower..."

"Ichika!"

Rin pulled the sliding door open and walked inside.

"Good job. Here's a towel. You okay with a sports drink?"

Wow, bless the heavens. Childhood friends were kind beings after all. I was on the verge of tears.

"Thanks. Man, that hit the spot."

I didn't like the feeling of sweat on my face. Being able to wipe that off and rehydrate felt incredible. Normally those sports drinks had too much sugar for my tastes, but after exerting myself so much, it felt perfect. Sugar was high-energy, after all. The drink was room temperature, which was also how I liked it. After a workout, your body was still very warm, so having a cold liquid pour into you always felt like suicide to me. A lukewarm drink was the way to go. Cold drinks could be more refreshing sometimes, but I didn't want to damage my body in the name of short-lived refreshment.

"You haven't changed, Ichika. You worry about your body like you're a senior citizen."

"Hey, you gotta start being careful while you're young. If the body can't last, you're done. You're the one who suffers first if you wreck your body."

"Yeah, you sure sound like an old man."

"Shut up."

Rin looked at me the way someone looks at something they understand perfectly. It unsettled me a little. I didn't want someone to see straight into my soul.

—*Hm, was she always this cute?*

The last time I'd seen her had been in the winter of eighth grade. That was only a year ago, but somehow she'd picked up something that made her seem more feminine to me. It was that something you could only find in girls that stirred the man within you.

"Ichika, did you feel lonely without me?"

"Sure. It's always sad if you lose someone to hang out with."

"That's not what I mean," she said, smiling.

Rin was in a good mood and went on without pause. Looking at her now reminded me of the time she'd sold me tickets to some weird movie.

—*Wait a sec. Is she trying to pawn something off on me again?*

I had to be careful. Fool me once, shame on you, but now was the second time.

"Rin."

"Yeah?"

"I'm not buying it."

Rin's features dropped. Had I guessed wrong?

"Look... You're reunited with your long-lost childhood friend! I'm sure there's something you want to say."

—*Oh, okay... Uhh... Nope, not really.*

"Like, for example..."

"Ahem! Ahem!"

Houki coughed so audibly it interrupted Rin, then she began to talk as though all that hadn't mattered to her.

"Ichika, I'm going ahead. You can use the *shower* first if you want."

"Oh, thanks."

"See you later, Ichika."

The way she said that had been a bit weird. My imagination was playing a lot of tricks on me lately, far too many times.

"Ichika, what did she mean?"

Houki had left the pit. Rin's good mood had dissipated. She forced herself to make an awkward smile, but I knew she was in a bad mood. Her voice was also about two octaves lower.

"Hm? Oh, normally Houki gets the shower first, but I'm pretty sweaty today so I figured I'd ask her to swa—"

"Th-Th-The shower?! Normally?! I-Ichika, what are you two?!" Rin cried.

"Uh, I told you that before. Childhood friends."

"Wh-Wh-What does that have to do with the turns you take showering?!"

Oh. Right. I'd never explained that.

"Houki and I got assigned the same room."

"What...?"

"Uh, there were a lot of weird things going on when I enrolled. They couldn't give me a different room, so now me and Houki have one."

"Y-You're sleeping in the same room as her?"

"Yeah, that's how it happened. I'm happy it ended up being Houki. If they'd put me in a room with some random girl, that would've made me a lot more nervous."

"....."

"What's wrong?"

"This is horrible..." Rin muttered.

"Huh?"

I didn't quite catch what Rin had said, so I tried to listen closely, but she'd turned away. I couldn't see her face, either.

"And that's why you're okay with it?! Because she's your childhood friend?!"

"Whoa!"

She'd suddenly swung her head around and almost hit it against mine. It was really close.

"Fine. All right. Yes, yes, I get it now!"

Rin nodded a few times. I had no idea what she'd just come to accept. So many mysteries.

"Ichika!"

"Yes, hello?"

"You have two childhood friends! Don't forget that!"

"I know that, but thanks..."

"See you later, then!"

Rin spun around and disappeared. Maybe "see you later" should be named sentence of the year, and we were only in April. Wait, didn't Rin want to talk about the past or something?

—*You know, Rin. Not doing something when you say you will hurts the trust others have in you.*

"Hmm...."

I couldn't get a hang of girls, much less my childhood friends.

◇

"There you have it! Change rooms with me!"

"G-Get lost! Why would I do that?!"

It was some time past eight in the dorms. After dinner, I was in my room making tea and trying to relax, when Rin came barging in. Those two were getting off to a really bad start.

"Hey, I'm sure you don't wanna live together with a boy, Shinonono. You have to be mindful of him all the time. You just can't relax! But I don't mind all that, so I just thought we'd switch."

"I-I didn't say I don't want to live with him. Besides, this is between me and Ichika! This is none of your business!"

"Hey, don't worry. I'm a childhood friend, too."

"Why does that matter?!"

They fought like that for a while. Neither was really listening to the other. Rin was just being herself, and only focused on what she was trying to do, and Houki was being herself, and was very stubborn. There was no way the discussion was going to have a happy ending. Even in the 21st century, humans were the same as always. How philosophical. Either way, unless my eyes were starting to go bad, it looked like Rin had already brought all her luggage over, but surely that wasn't the case.

"Rin."

"Yeah?"

"Is that all your luggage?"

"Yeah. I just need a big travel bag and I'm good to go."

She'd always been pretty ascetic about things like this. Houki didn't need a lot of luggage either, for a girl at least, but Rin just didn't need much of anything at all. Back in the day, I joked once that she was always ready to run away from home, but that didn't go over too well with her.

By the way, Cecilia invited me to her room once, and it looked like some high-end hotel. The bed, the mirror, the chairs, the table; everything was custom-made for her. She'd even brought in new tapestry and lights. That freaked me out, to be honest. It'd been the first time I'd seen a canopy bed, too. I felt really sorry for the girl who had to share the room with her. It looked like Cecilia had basically annexed the entire room. Let's live a bit more modestly, Ms. British National Cadet.

"Anyway, I'm gonna live here too, starting tomorrow."

"L-Like hell you will! Get out! This is my room!"

"It's also Ichika's room, right? What's the problem?"

Rin looked at me, hoping for a yes. Houki also looked at me— more like stared— hoping for support in kicking Rin back out.

"Don't make this about me."

My head hurt. I needed medicine, with kindness as the ingredient.

"Anyway! We're not swapping rooms! So get out, and go back to yours!"

"By the way, Ichika. Do you remember our promise?" Rin chimed in.

"D-Don't ignore me! Fine, I'll just have to use force."

Houki was getting angry, and went over to her bed to retrieve her bamboo sword.

"Hey, don't d—"

I didn't have time to stop her. Houki had lost her cool, and swung her bamboo sword at the unarmed Rin.

Tching!

There was a loud noise.

"Rin, are you okay?" I blurted out.

"Of course I'm okay. I'm a National Cadet, remember?"

I thought the bamboo sword had hit her on the head, but she had partially brought out her IS, and blocked the attack with her right arm.



“.....?!”

Houki was the most surprised of all of us. While bringing out an IS was common enough, to do it quickly relied heavily on the person piloting it. IS formation was limited by our human reflexes, after all... And Rin had shown hers to be incredible. Houki's attack couldn't have been blocked at the last second by a mere novice. This little display demonstrated that Rin was a very competent fighter.

“Don't you think the one really in danger here is the person without an IS?”

“Uhh...”

Perhaps this exchange had been so much of a shock that Houki regained her composure, and she looked away uncomfortably.

“I don't mind.”

Rin really didn't care much about what Houki had done, and removed the parts of the IS she had brought out. The armor plate across her right arm glowed and disappeared.

“U-Um...”

It was awkward. Houki was embarrassed, and said nothing. Rin grinned at me, waiting for me to say something.

—*Oh, right. She mentioned something about a promise.*

“Our promise, Rin?”

“Y-Yeah. You remember... Right?”

She lowered her head and gazed at me from the corner of her eyes. She looked embarrassed... But maybe that was just my imagination playing tricks on me again.

“Um... That thing about... When your cooking gets better you'll—”

“Y-Yeah! That!” Rin said, excitedly.

—“Treat me to sweet-and-sour pork...”

Yeah, she'd promised that in grade school. I was super proud of myself. My memory was simply amazing. My brain cells were outdoing themselves. Eternal praise to the neurons in my skull.

“What?”

“You promised you'd treat me to food once your cooking got better.”

—*Food! Free food! What an amazing deal.*

“Man, you gotta say my memory is incredible, ri—”

Wham!

“Huh...?”

I was slapped in the face. It was so sudden that I couldn't really process it. I blinked. Houki's eyes and mine met. She also looked surprised and confused.

“U-Uh...”

As I turned my head back, Rin edged into view again. She looked just about the worst I'd ever seen her.

“.....”

Her shoulders were trembling, and her glare was full of anger. And what's more, there were tears in her eyes, and her lips were pressed together.

"U-Um... Rin..."

"You're horrible! How can you not remember your promise to a girl?! You're a disgrace to all men! I hope the dogs bite you to death!"

In one swift motion, she quickly picked up her bag from the floor, and ran out the open door.

Bam! The door was slammed shut behind her.

"Shit. I made her angry."

It was clearly my fault... Probably. Maybe. It had really hurt my pride when she'd said I was a disgrace to all men. I couldn't remember a promise so important that it would have justified such an insult.

—But... She was crying, so... Yeah.

"Ichika."

"Y-Yeah, Houki?"

"I hope a horse kicks you to death."

And now Houki was angry too, for whatever reason. My cheek was beginning to hurt. It was probably still going to be red the next day. If it was still visible, the other girls in the class were going to ask me endless questions. I was never going to get used to that. How do girls manage to jump around in conversation so much, anyway?

"Hah..."

I decided to just go to bed. It was only about nine, but still, staying awake would have done nothing beneficial. Even Houki was angry. I just had to go to sleep. Maybe a new day was going to fix everything. Probably not. Girls stay happy and angry three times as long as men, and that went doubly for all the girls around me.

The next morning, I found a letter in front of my door. The title said "Class League Match Schedule." The first match was against Class B, Rin.

Chapter IV: Showdown! The Class League Match

It was May. Even a few weeks after the fact, Rin's mood was still foul. Or rather, it had gotten worse by the day. She never came up to me again ever since she left my room in tears, and whenever we ran into each other in the hallway or the cafeteria, she ignored me. It was clear to me that she was angry. If the flak she was giving me had protected the battleship Yamato in World War II, maybe she wouldn't have sunk. But maybe not.

"Ichika, the class league match is next week. The arena will be remodeled for it, so today is the last day we can practice."

It was after school, and the sky had taken on an orange glow. We were at the third arena to practice. "We" being, as always, Houki, Cecilia, and I. The two girls had calmed down a lot over the course of the last few weeks, and it was astonishing that I rarely found myself under verbal siege or encircled by their glares. That said, I was still the focus of everyone's attention, and the seats of the arena were basically filled. A bunch of second year girls who had tried to sell "reserved seats" had gotten punished by my sister Chifuyu the other day; the ringleader has been unable to leave her dorm room for three days. What had my sister done to her?

"Your IS piloting has gotten a lot better. Now is the time we should—"

"Well, he is keeping up with the training I am giving him. I would have been more surprised had he not learned all these things from me."

"Hmph. As if teaching him mid-range combat tactics is of any use?! His IS has no ranged capability."

Houki responded with a bit of barb in her voice because she'd been interrupted. And she was right, anyway. My IS, Byakushiki, didn't have a single ranged weapon. I had only Yukihiro Nigata, and nothing else. It's normal that all IS units had their own sets of equipment. Typically the default equipment wasn't enough, so they also carried auxiliary gear. In Cecilia's case, the default was Blue Tears, and the auxiliary gear was her rifle and a close-combat knife. IS units carried expansion slots to allow auxiliary equipment to be added. How much equipment could be added depended on the individual unit, but generally at least two more pieces of equipment were possible. Generally... My IS unit was different. It had no expansion slots, and the default equipment couldn't be changed, so I was stuck with my single close-combat blade.

"How is that different from the sword practice he does with you, Shinonono? Practicing without the IS is just a waste of time."

"Wh-What? Don't you know that kendo can be adapted to anything you need? It provides a foundation for all endeavors you could—"

"Ichika, let's start by practicing the zero-recoil turn today."

"You little— Listen to me, Ichika!"

"I'm listening!"

Why was she upset at me now? I felt this was really unfair as I reached for the door sensor to arena three, pit A. It checked my fingerprint and vein pattern, and the door cranked open. The air rushed out from the pressure. I always thought that sounded really cool.

"I've been waiting for you, Ichika!"

Rin was standing inside the pit. She had her arms crossed, and smiled confidently. The last time I'd seen her previously, she was still angry with me, so this turn of events was surprising. Houki and Cecilia were frowning behind me. I hoped everything would work out.

"You! How did you get in he—"

"This place is off limits to unauthorized personnel."

Cecilia interrupted Houki. I gave up. The day was going to end with blood.

"I'm authorized because of Ichika. This is fine, isn't it?" Rin smiled, triumphantly.

—*That's... not really how the rules worked, but okay.*

"Uh-huh... I'd love to hear what about you and him authorizes you to do anything."

"You impudent little girl!"

Cecilia was beginning to lose it, too. I looked at Houki. The corners of her mouth were twitching, and it scared me. When her rage was quietly boiling like that, it put me on edge, even if it wasn't my fault. It wasn't for the faint of heart! There were deadly weapons nearby.

"You're thinking about something weird, Ichika."

"Nah, nothing. Just a warning going off inside my head that the slasher is in town."

"Y-You goddamn—"

Houki came forward to grab me, but Rin jumped between us.

"This is my turn to shine! I'm the main character! You're all extras!"

"E-Extras?!"

"Look, I'm not getting anything done. See ya. So, Ichika. Did you realize your mistake?"

"Hm? What do you mean?"

"Like... I... said! You're probably thinking it was pretty awful how you made me angry, and how you wanted to make up, right?"

"Well, you know... You were avoiding me."

"What...? Like, would you leave a girl alone just because she says she wants to be left alone?"

"Yeah."

Sure I would. If she wants to be left alone, that's what you do, right?

"Did I say something weird?"

"Weird? Argh!"

Rin was holding a hand to her head. She was visibly angry, and a little frustrated. I just hoped she wasn't going to blame me if that ruffled her hair.

"Apologize to me!"

That was so straightforward I didn't know what to say. It's not like I was unable to bow and say sorry, but I wasn't going to do it for no reason.

"Why, though?! I remembered our promise!"

"Are you still going on about that? This is so stupid. You don't understand the meaning!"

—*Meaning? Like how to take a mean? Excuse me, I passed math class.*

"You're thinking about a dumb pun, aren't you?"

Damn it. Only my two childhood friends knew me that well. I had to be more careful.

"This is insane. You're saying you're not going to apologize?!"

"I will if you explain what's going on."

"I-I'm doing this because I don't want to explain it!"

Yeah, that made no sense to me. How could I solve a problem when I didn't even know what was wrong? But now that she'd shown herself to be so angry with me, I couldn't just leave it. A man had to live up to his word. If we don't do what we say, then people won't trust what we say. Sincerity comes from utmost consistency in our actions. As a real man, I had to prove mine.

"All right, let's do it like this. Next week's the class league match. Whoever wins can make the other say exactly one thing, okay?"

"Right. I'll have you explain this to me," I replied.

You get what you ask for. That was the very basis of our economy. And if I'd brought this on somehow, I had to make it right.

"E-Explain... Um..."

Rin was frozen, still pointing her finger at me dramatically. She was turning red. I didn't understand. Was it really so humiliating to be asked to explain why she was angry?

"Well, if you don't want to do this, we don't have to."

I said that out of the goodness of my heart, but it had the opposite effect.

"Like hell we're dropping this! You better rehearse your big apology to me!"

"Why would I, dummy?"

"You're the dummy! Blockhead! Moron! Idiot!"

—*Wow...*

"Shut up, flat chest!"

Oh. That was probably a bad one.

Fshoom!

There was a loud, explosion-like noise, and the entire room shook a little. I looked at Rin, and her body was surrounded by IS armor, from her right index finger up to her shoulder. It had felt as though she had punched the wall as hard as she could, but her hand was nowhere near it.

"Now you've done it... You've said the one thing you shouldn't have!"
Blue lightning raced over her IS armor. Yeah, now she was really angry.
This was bad.

"H-Hey, I'm sorry! That was my bad. Forgive me."

"Of course it was 'your bad!' It's always your fault!"

That was kind of silly, but it wasn't the time for more arguments.

"I was going to give you a chance, but it looks like you really want to die.
Fine, then. I'll grant you your wish. I'll beat you to a pulp!"

She glared at me one last time and disappeared. I heard a door slam shut somewhere; even the door sounded afraid. Rin was totally serious now. I looked at the wall and saw a crater about 30 centimeters in diameter. Being able to dent a wall made of special alloy metal was pretty scary.

"She's a Power type. And also a close-combat model, just like yours."

Cecilia was studying the damage to the wall. Meanwhile, I engaged in the most profound regret in years.

—Me and my big mouth... I just had to mention her chest. Come on now, Ichika.

That was the thing that she worried about the most, and which also got her the most upset. That had been absolutely, unequivocally, my fault.

—Damn it...

Whether or not I won, I'd have to apologize to Rin regardless.



The day of the match came, and we were at the second arena. It was the first battle. Between Rin and I, that is. News had spread that the two new students were squaring off, so the arena was filled to the brim. I could even see people standing in the aisles between the seats. All the students who weren't able to get in were apparently watching a live broadcast outside.

—I don't really have time to worry about all these people...

I looked across the arena and saw Rin and her IS, Shenlong. She was quietly waiting for the match to begin. Just as with Blue Tears, I could see she had unattached units. They were floating above her shoulder in the form of spiked balls. Some kind of attack equipment? They didn't look like something you wanted to get hit by.

The reading of her IS's name reminded me of that Chinese dragon. It wasn't written the same way, but still. Whatever, if you read the characters the Japanese way, you could just call it Kouryuu... It was a legit reading.

"Okay, both of you go to your starting positions."

Rin and I flew up into the sky. We were about five meters apart, and Rin and I were talking on an open channel.

"Ichika, if you apologize now, I'll let you off easy."

"If that's all you've got to say, then I don't need it. Come at me with everything you've got."

I didn't say that to sound tough. It was the same it'd been with Cecilia. I just hated not taking these sorts of things seriously. Battles were serious business; there was only a point to them if you thought as much.

"Just to let you know, the Absolute Defense system isn't perfect. You can hurt the pilot if the power of the attack pierces the total shield energy."

That wasn't a threat, it was the truth. It was only a rumor, but supposedly there were even weapons designed specifically to hurt the pilot. Those were obviously against the competition rules, and they were very dangerous. Still... The point being, that it was possible to directly torment the pilot, and for a National Cadet, being able to do that was definitely feasible. The fact that my battle with Cecilia had been so close was nothing short of a miracle. Miracles don't occur twice.

"Both of you, please start the match."

A buzzer sound rang out and as soon as it stopped, Rin leapt forward.

Bam!

I brought the Yukihiro Nigata out and just barely managed to block her attack. Then I used the Cross Grid Turn that Cecilia had taught me to swing the IS around and face Rin again.

"Hmm. Not bad, blocking my first attack. But..."

Rin was holding two oddly-shaped halberd-like weapons which she swung around like a baton. The blade on them was so large it looked more like a blade with a small arm attached, and Rin swung them around like they weighed nothing. What's more, her attacks were so fast it took all I had just to parry her.

—This is bad. At this range, it's going to drag out forever. I need to create some distance.

"Gotcha now!"

The armor above Rin's shoulder slid open. Inside were glowing balls, and I was slammed away by a powerful force. For a moment my mind went dark as I almost lost consciousness. Rin didn't stop attacking, of course.

"That was just a jab," she smiled at me, confidently.

After a jab, the boxer goes in for the knockout punch.

Wham!

"Ngh!"

An invisible fist slammed into me, and I hit the ground. I could feel pain because some of the impact had penetrated the shield barrier. It had done 76 damage, all in one blow. Things were going really, really badly.



"What is that?" I asked, as I looked at a live feed down into the pit.

"An impact cannon. It uses air pressure to make a gun barrel of sorts, and fires a concentrated ball of pressure forward," Cecilia answered, as she was staring at the same monitor.

Cecilia continued on and on about third-generation units like Shenlong and Blue Tears, but I wasn't listening. I couldn't stand watching him fight so desperately. It hurt my soul hurt every time he took a hit.

—Ichika...

This was way more brutal and merciless than when he'd fought against Cecilia. I just hoped he'd come back safely, above all else.



"You can dodge pretty well. I'm amazed, because the nice thing about my weapon, Ryuuhou, here, is that you can't see the barrel or the bullets."

Yes, that was true. Not only were the bullets invisible, but so was the barrel. It was really hard to keep track of, and it seemed like her cannon could more or less fire in any direction around her without restrictions. I could try above or below her, but it even fired on me when I was behind her. It went straight for me every single time. Granted, Rin was also a very good shot. She was really skilled at basic movements and maneuvers. Everything she did was fast and effortless. To simply call her "good" was an understatement.

—I could use the hypersensors to detect unusual patterns in the air flow, but that takes too long. I need to get the better of her, somehow.

I clenched my fist around Yukihiro Nigata and tried to remember all of my training.

"The barrier cancellation?"

Chifuyu nodded. After the battle with Cecilia, Houki and I were thinking a lot about why it I had lost suddenly. We had sifted through the IS log files and couldn't really make sense of them. Chifuyu eventually got sick of it and explained it to us.

"That's Yukihiro's special ability. It can bypass the enemy shield barrier and damage the unit. What happens then, Shinonono?"

"U-Um. The IS Absolute Defense system activates and drains a very large amount of shield energy."

"Exactly. I made use of that ability a lot to become the world champion," said Chifuyu, offhandedly.

She didn't make a big deal out of this accomplishment. Every three years the IS global tournament called "Mondo Grosso" was held, and she had won the first iteration, even if she rarely talked about it. I had complex feelings about having such a formidable and well-known sister. There were lots of bad aspects to it.

"So if that strike had hit her, I'd have won?"

"If it had, yes. Why do you think you lost?"

"Um... I don't know why, but my shield energy hit zero."

"There's a reason for it. There always is. Yukira's special ability comes at the price of your own shield energy. Obviously it would, you idiot."

"Oh..."

—Yeah, that made sense, so...

"So... You're basically converting your own shield energy into damage output?" Houki asked, to which Chifuyu nodded.

"It's a defective unit."

—What?!

"A defective unit? What the hell do you mean?"

Wham!

I guess that hadn't been polite enough towards a teacher.

"I suppose that isn't entirely accurate. The IS is far from a finished development, so you can't say it's defective. However, it's a little more focused on attack than other units. Did you see how all the expansion slots are taken up?"

"O-Oh, that's a defect?"

"Listen to me; the point is that you can only use Yukihiro by sacrificing all the expansion slots. In exchange, the attack power is outstanding."

—*Hmm, I remember that Chifuyu only ever used Yukihiro...*

It seemed inhuman to me that someone was able to win with just that. I'd always known that my sister was really good, but only since becoming an IS pilot myself did I realize just how good she really was.

"A novice like you could never handle ranged fire, anyway. Recoil compensation, leading the target, controlling the distance, 1-0 stopping, zero-recoil turns, ammo types, atmospheric interference, planning your battle out... There's so much you can't do... Or can you?"

"I'm sorry."

If you understand your faults, apologize. Chifuyu nodded. This was enough for her.

"Focusing entirely on one thing suits you. After all... You're my brother."

After that, our practice focused on close-combat and basic maneuvers like high-G stops. It turned out that my experience practicing kendo with Houki was useful in being able to control the distance, and also overall becoming a better fighter.

—*Now the important thing is spirit...*

Normally you'd think that she was far superior in skill; in opposition to Cecilia, Rin became more composed the more hectic combat was. She was just a fundamentally strong combatant. The only thing that could bridge the gap with an opponent like that was spirit. Without the right mindset, I couldn't win. That was my single ray of hope in this desperate battle. Now all I had to do was act upon it.

"Rin."

"Yeah?"

"I won't hold back."

I stared at her. The force of my gaze seemed to push her back, as her features melted a little.

"Wh-What... Of course you wouldn't... A-Anyway! I'll show you how big the gulf between us is!"

Rin twirled her twin blades around herself and entered a new posture. I readied myself to accelerate and close the distance before the impact cannon could hit me. Much of the time during the preceding week had been spent practicing Ignition Boost. As long as I aimed it right, I could fight on even footing, even with National Cadets. The IS and its safeguards made sure I didn't lose consciousness from the G-forces involved.

“HAAAAAH!”

I only had one chance at this surprise attack, which was why I also activated Yukihiro's barrier cancellation. Unless I took away most of her shield, her cannons were just going to whittle me down.

BA-BOOOM!

“Huh?!”

Moments before my blade could touch Rin, a blast shook the arena.

—*Was that Rin...? No, it couldn't have been.*

Both the area of effect and its destruction were an order of magnitude larger. There was smoke rising from the center of the arena. Apparently something had penetrated the arena's isolation shield and impacted in the center.

“Wh-What was that? What's going on?”

Rin was just as confused as I was and had opened a private channel.

“Ichika! The match is off! Go back to the pit!”

—*What's with all the shouting all of a sudden?*

Just as I thought about that, my IS hypersensors sounded off all kinds of warnings.

*[HEAT SIGNATURE DETECTED. SOURCE: UNKNOWN IS UNIT.
ENEMY LOCK-ON DETECTED.]*

“Wh—”

The arena's isolation shields were the same as those used on IS units. An IS unit powerful enough to blast through those shields was now in the arena, and it was locked on to me. What a situation to be in!

“Ichika! Hurry!”

“What about you?!”

I didn't know how to answer on the private channel so I made an open one.

“I'll buy you time! Run away!”

“Run away?! I'd never leave a girl behind!”

“Idiot! You're a weaker fighter than me! Just do it!”

She really wasn't pulling any punches. Since I hadn't responded on her private channel, Rin was answering me on the open channel, too.

“I'm not going to stick around either. With a situation like this, I'm sure the academy brass will show up in a moment and clean it u—”

“Careful!”

In the nick of time, I carried Rin out of the way of the blast. A scorching ray seared through the sky where Rin had been.

“A beam weapon... And with a lot more output than Cecilia's IS.”

Just seeing the estimates the hypersensors were showing me gave me goosebumps.

“H-Hey! Idiot! Let me go!”

“H-Hey, stop struggling. Don't punch me!”

“Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!”

I still had the shield protecting me, but she was still slapping away at me. It did not feel great.

"D-Don't touch me there!"

"It's firing!"

I ignored Rin's complaints as rapid-fire energy beams seared through the surrounding smoke. I managed to dodge them somehow, and the shooter began to slowly lift up into the sky.

"Who is that?"

It looked totally different from the IS units I knew. It was dark, mostly black or gray, with unnaturally long arms that were longer than its legs. And it had no head; the shoulders and the head were fused into one. But the strangest part about it was the fact that it was fully covered in armor.

Normally an IS unit has only partial armor plates. Why, you ask? Because more wasn't necessary. Covering the unit in armor would make no sense. Of course, Guard type IS units carried physical shields, but I'd never heard of an IS that fully covered the pilot. And it was also very large. Clearly, this was no ordinary IS. The arms alone looked to be more than two meters in length, and there were thrusters all over its body, perhaps to maintain altitude. Near the fused head I saw sensor lenses distributed irregularly, and the beam cannons were mounted two apiece on the arms.

"Who're you?"

"....."

But of course, the mysterious intruder didn't respond.

"Orimura! Huang! Leave the arena at once! The teachers will subdue the unit!"

Ms. Yamada popped up on my com. She sounded a lot more dignified than I remembered.

"No, we'll stop it before you're all here."

The IS had penetrated the isolation shield. That meant all the spectators and everyone outside of an IS were in danger of being injured.

"You all right, Rin?"

"A-Are you talking to me? L-Let me go! I can't move!"

"Oh, sorry."

As I let go of her, she wrapped her arms around her body protectively. She must have really hated it. I felt sorry for that.

"Orimura! D-Don't do that! We can't have anything happen to the student!"

That was all I managed to catch from her. The enemy IS was attacking again and I had to dodge.

—*Phew.*

"Hmph. That unit sure is motivated."

"Looks like it."

Rin and I were hovering side by side and observing our enemy.

"Ichika, I'll back you up with ranged fire. You go and attack it. You only have that weapon, right?"

"Yeah. Okay, I'll do it."

We tapped our weapons together, then we went in. Rin and I, the improvised team.

◇

"Hey! Are you listening?! Orimura! Huang! Are you listening?!"

There was no reason to yell on the IS com systems, but Yamada was too nervous to realize that. Meanwhile Chifuyu, looking at this from a few meters away, was more calm.

"They said they will do it. Let them."

"M-M-Ms. Orimura! You can't be serious about that!"

"Calm down. Drink some coffee. The lack of sugar is making you nervous."

"Um... That's salt."

"....."

Her hand stopped and returned the white spoonful to its vessel.

"Why is there salt here?"

"I-I don't know? But it says on the jar that it's salt..."

"....."

"Oh! You must be worried about your brother after all! So you mistook it for—"

"....."

There was an uncomfortable silence. Too uncomfortable, in fact. Yamada tried to divert the conversation in the hope of changing this.

"U-Um..."

"Yamada, here's your coffee."

"Um... But there is salt in it already..."

"Your coffee."

She drank some of the coffee. It was a little salty. Tears stood in her eyes.

"Thank you..."

"Drink it while it's hot."

Truly, demons lived among men.

"Give me permission to pilot my IS! I will attack immediately!" Cecilia pleaded.

"I would like to let you, but look at this."

She touched the terminal a few times, and the information on it changed. Now it displayed status values about the second arena.

"The isolation shield was set to level four? And now all the gates are locked? Did the IS do that?"

"It looks like it. They can't escape, and we can't support them."

Chifuyu said this in an even, composed voice, but when she punched buttons on the terminal, her irritation was obvious.

"Th-Then we need to request immediate assistance from the government!"

"We're doing that. The elite from the third years is hacking the system right now. We're going to send in a rescue squad once the isolation shield is down."

Chifuyu's eyebrows were twitching. Her growing irritation was showing. Cecilia interpreted this as a sign of the danger they were in and sat down.

"Hah... So I can't do anything but wait..."

"You're not going to be in the rescue squad anyway."

"Wh-What?!"

"Your IS is designed to fight several opponents at once. Fighting together in a group against one is going to make it harder for the rest."

"That's not true! I wouldn't make it harder for them!"

"Did you practice team combat, then? What was your job there? How did you use the bits? What did your allies do? How competent was the opponent? How much team combat did you—"

"F-Fine! I get it!"

"Hmph. Good."

Chifuyu could have kept going for another hour. It stopped Cecilia in her tracks. She gave up.

"Hah... I'm upset that I can't respond to that..."

She felt exhausted, and sighed a little deeper than before, then she noticed something.

"Um... Where is Shinonono?"

Cecilia looked around. Chifuyu looked at the monitors grimly, and somewhat differently than before. But at the time, the others did not notice that.



"Tch...!"

I was in range for my ultimate attack, but my strike was dodged by the enemy. That was the fourth time I'd missed my chance.

"Ichika! You idiot! Do it properly!"

"I'm trying!"

I attacked so fast and ferociously that nobody could have dodged it, but the enemy IS's thrusters had an astonishing level of output. It needed no more than a second to create massive distance; no matter how much Rin distracted the enemy, it always managed to dodge my attacks in time.

—*This is bad...*

My shield energy was down to just 60. I had only one more shot to use my barrier cancellation.

"Ichika, break away!"

"Okay!"

Whenever the enemy unit dodged my attacks, it responded with a ridiculous counter-attack. It came at me flailing its long arms, like a spooked horse, all the while still shooting beams from said arms.

"This damn thing is so annoying!"

Rin opened her impact cannons and fired. The enemy slammed aside her invisible projectiles; that had been her seventh attempt. Either way, her fire support distracted the unit, and I escaped its immediate range. Thankfully, its beam weapon's effective range while in rapid-fire mode was only about half its normal distance.

"Rin, how much energy you got left?"

"About 180."

Our shield energy was quite spent. She'd lost a fair chunk, but not as much as I had. Having to use the Yukihiro Nigata was taking its toll.

"This is tough... The chance of hitting it hard enough to power it down with what little we have left is probably in the single digits."

"Yeah, but it's not zero," I said.

"I give up. We've basically run out of options. When faced with something you don't understand, you take the safe and boring way out like some old man. But really, you like to gamble, don't you?"

"Oh, shut up."

I didn't gamble, by the way. That stuff was addictive for me. Betting on dumb crap with Gotanda in middle school had cost me a lot of soft drinks. I'd decided back then that I wanted to save the normal way, and I was going to need to because our pensions were all toast.

"So what now?" asked Rin.

"Run away if you want to."

"What? Are you making fun of me?! I'm a National Cadet, you know! Like hell I'd run away with my tail between my legs!"

The single most desired trait in all National Cadets was apparently pride. Cecilia always acted the same way, after all.

"Right. Well, I'll make sure I have your back, then."

"Uh... Oh... O-Okay... Tha—"

Rin was turning pink when a beam seared by next to her. Well, we were still in battle after all. It wasn't like we were paying no attention at all, but we had to focus again.

"Hey, Rin. Don't its tactics remind you of something?"

"Huh? I dunno. You're not going to say it looks like a horse, right?"

"That's just what it looks like. No, I mean, like... Remember that humanoid robot some car company made a long time ago?"

"Nope..."

She must have been living under a rock at the time. ASI-something? I couldn't remember either.

"I mean... It moves like a machine, don't you think?"

"An IS is a machine."

"That's not what I mean. Like... Do you think there's really a person inside there?"

"What? An IS can't move without a human ins—"

Rin fell silent.

"It hasn't attacked us much whenever we were talking. Like it's listening to us..."

Rin was trying to recall the battle. These were the times she was dead serious about everything.

"But... An unmanned unit shouldn't be possible. An IS can never move without a human being inside. That's how they work."

I'd also read that in a textbook: there had to be someone inside the IS. But was that really true? We had no way of knowing what cutting-edge research was already up to. They wouldn't be telling anybody about it, after all.

"Okay... Let's just assume... What if this unit is unmanned?"

"What, are you saying we can win if it's unmanned?"

"Yeah. We can attack with everything we've got if we know there's nobody in there."

Between Yukihiro Nigata and Reiraku Byakuya, my ultimate attack, my IS had a ton of destructive power. It was simply too powerful to be used in league matches or training, but against an unmanned unit, it didn't matter what havoc it could wreak. I had come up with a plan.

"You're not even hitting it, though. 'Give everything,' my butt."

"The next one will hit."

"I wanna see that. I don't think it's possible, but let's assume that the unit isn't manned."

Maybe Rin knew that I had a plan. She was smiling at me. She'd shown that smile to me before, sometimes. It was the kind of face that said "And if you're wrong, you're treating me to crepes." She was the devil. She'd been basically extorting me since middle school.

"Ichika."

"Hm?"

"What should I do?"

I'll do whatever you need. But if it fails, you're treating me.'

She was very good at communicating that with her eyes. There's a good phrase for this: tacit understanding.

"When I give the signal, I want you to shoot him with everything you've got."

"Okay. But it's not going to hit."

"That's fine."

"All right, let's—"

I repositioned to attack, but then a voice blared out over the arena's speakers.

"ICHIKA!"

High audio feedback noise followed. Houki was yelling at me.

"Wh-What are you doing?!"

The referee and the commentator were lying next to her. Apparently she had stormed in and knocked them out. They weren't going to wake up for a while; Oh, boy.

“You’re a man... How can a man not manage to win against this thing?!” yelled Houki.

Her voice generated a lot of audio feedback again. I could see her enlarged on my hypersensors. Houki was out of breath and panting. She looked angry, but also scared... It was strange to see.

“.....”

Shit. The enemy IS had become distracted by the arena-wide transmission. Its sensor lenses turned away from us and were now aimed at Houki.

“Houki, run!”

She wasn’t going to make it. I had to go in immediately. I changed my posture and accelerated. My eyes were leveled at the enemy IS, which was turning towards Houki.



"Rin, fire!"

"O-Okay!"

Rin lowered her arms to let her shoulder-mounted cannons fire forward. She was going to fire a full-power shot, so she had to expand her auxiliary-powered wings. I moved my unit straight into her line of fire.

"H-Hey, you idiot! What are you doing?! Move out of the way!"

"Just fire!"

"Damn it! Don't blame me!"

When I felt the high-energy reaction at my back, I activated my Ignition Boost. The principle of instant acceleration was as such: I was going to expel energy from my rear thruster wings, absorb it with the main frame, and eject it with even more pressure. In turn, this would generate an explosive amount of inertia that I could use to accelerate. All in all, that meant I could use any energy coming in from behind, and the speed I got out of it was proportional to the amount of energy put in.

Bang! I felt a massive energy impact on my back.

The projectiles from the cannon had hit me. My body creaked, and I was thrown forward.

"WHOOAAA!"

The light of Yukihiro Nigata in my right hand burned even more brightly than before. The blade size around the fuller had grown by one.

I could use Reiraku Byakuya now; energy conversion rate was over 90%.

I knew it. I could feel it. It felt just like the first time I'd touched an IS. Everything was clear and lucid, like I understood all that was around me. My focus was ten times better than normal, if not more, and my mind so much faster. I could feel the power in my hands.

—Chifuyu... Houki... Rin... I will protect them... I will protect everyone!

I cut off the enemy's right arm with my massive slice. In return, its left arm hit me dead on, and just at the point of impact, I sensed a heat signature. It was firing its beam weapon.

"ICHKA!"

Houki and Rin were yelling.

—Hang on, it's not over yet!

"Locked on?"

"Perfectly."

I could hear her clearly. She could be annoying sometimes, but I was glad to hear her voice then. The four units of Blue Tears fired on the enemy IS from the stands. My attack had destroyed the isolation shield. My plan had been enacted.

Bam! The enemy IS was thrown to the ground by the laser hits.

Without the shield barrier, the enemy IS took all the shots without any time to react. Perhaps a human could have anticipated this attack, but not a machine. Improvisation was the greatest asset of human beings, after all.

Human beings were crafty; they found ways to trick you. Machines couldn't do the same.

"That was close."

"I knew you could do it, Cecilia."

I answered with full confidence. I'd fought her before, after all. I knew how good she was. Perhaps she didn't expect this? She seemed flustered when she answered.

"I-I see..... Of course! After all, I am Cecilia Alcott. I am the British National Cadet!"

This was going on over our private channel. I didn't know how to answer someone privately I hadn't met before, but older contacts turned up in my log, and I could use that. I just had to picture them at the back of my mind, and imagine myself talking to them.

"Hmph. At least it's over now."

[WARNING: LOCK-ON DETECTED. ENEMY IS REACTIVATED.]

"Wha—"

It only had its left arm. The cannons on it had changed into high-output burst mode and were aimed straight at me. I could see the gathering light in its cannons. I dove straight towards the brightness without hesitation. Everything was bright. I couldn't see anything, but I could feel my sword striking heavy armor.



"Huh...?"

I felt pain in my body, and opened my eyes. I looked around, not knowing where I was. It seemed to be the infirmary. I was lying in bed, and the curtains were drawn around me. It made me feel confined, but also gave me a sense of peace. Quite the contradiction.

—So... What happened? My attack hit the enemy, but after that...

"You're awake."

The curtains were drawn aside. Action before thought. Yes, my sister Chifuyu had come.

"You're not in danger anymore, but you are pretty bruised. It's going to hurt like hell for a few days. Just accept it."

"Right..."

I was still a little out of it. I could listen to Chifuyu, but it didn't make much sense to me that my body was bruised. Outside the window, the sky was turning orange. It was after school, clearly.

"You took the impact cannon to the back at maximum capacity, and you cut off the Absolute Defense system, didn't you? You're lucky you didn't die."

I couldn't remember.

—Hmm, I didn't know the Absolute Defense system could even be cut off.

"Well, I'm happy you're alive. I wouldn't like seeing my little brother die."

Chifuyu's expression was much softer than it usually was; we were the only family the other had. She would never have let anybody else see such a soft side of her.

"Chifuyu..."

"Yeah?"

"I, uh... I'm sorry I worried you."

"I wasn't worried. You're my brother. You wouldn't die so easily."

Chifuyu smiled.

—*That is an abnormal level of trust.*

But I knew she probably wasn't comfortable showing more affection than that, so I didn't mind.

"Well, I need to deal with the aftermath, so I'll be back at work. Get some rest, and then you can go back to your room."

With that, Chifuyu marched out of the infirmary. She was always serious about her job, and was definitely the person I looked up to the most.

"Um... Ahem! Ahem!"

Someone came in, in Chifuyu's stead. I recognized that fake coughing. It was Houki.

Ga-sha! The curtain was drawn apart again.

Chifuyu had only drawn it halfway, but Houki didn't hold back, not like that was really necessary.

"Hey, Houki."

"H-Hey."

My ponytailed childhood friend crossed her arms. She didn't look mad at me, but she didn't look happy either.

"S-So, um... About the battle today..."

"Hm? Oh... Speaking of which, what happened to the league match? Did they annul it?"

"Oh, yeah. Of course. They had to after what happened."

—*That makes sense. I wonder when the rematch will be. At the very least, it hope it's after I'm fit again.*

"Wh-What were you thinking about?!"

"What?"

She was mad suddenly. I had no idea why she was indignant, or perhaps she was just acting like she was mad to hide something else.

"We won, so it turned out well, but... You should have just let the teachers deal with it! Your confidence is going to be the end of you one day!"

"Oh, so I won."

"That hardly counted as winning!"

—*So which is it?*

Houki's shoulders were heaving. She was pretty worked up. I couldn't imagine what had her so befuddled.

—*Ah, right.*

"Were you worried about me?"

"N-No! Who'd worry about your safety?"

Guess not, then. I was hoping my childhood friend would do that, but no such luck.

"A-Anyway! You should understand how good it was that we trained now. We'll keep going with that. All right?"

"Yeah, that's fine."

"Good. I'll be back in our room."

She wasn't going to wait for me, huh... Some loving childhood friend she was.

"Ichika..."

"Yeah?"

"So... I was looking at you fighting, and you looked really c... c... c..."

—*Crazy...?*

"Coo— Forget it!"

I couldn't quite catch that. If she wanted me to forget, then fine. That's what I was going to do.

"L-Later!"

Houki stormed out of the infirmary. She could have at least closed the door and pull the curtains closed, or something.

"Hm... I'm getting sleepy..."

Perhaps I was still exhausted, but sleep dragged me into its embrace. I welcomed it. The bed was nice and comfortable.

"....."

I could feel someone was near me; so close that our faces were almost touching. Who was it? How long had I slept?

"Ichika..."

"Rin?"

".....?!"

I recognized her voice and woke up. Rin's nose was about three centimeters from mine.

"What are you doing?"

"Y-Y-You were awake?!"

"I woke up from your voice. So what's going on? Why are you so flustered?"

"I-I'm not flustered! Don't get the wrong idea, you idiot!"

The word "idiot" was part of the grammatical makeup of her sentences, apparently. I could do without that kind of pop culture character trait.

"Oh... I heard the battle was annulled."

"Oh, yeah. I guess that happened..."

Rin sat down on a chair next to the bed. Perhaps she was going to peel me an apple? I couldn't see any apples.

"Oh."

"Y-Yeah?"

"What are we doing about the match now? Did they set a date yet?"

"Don't worry about that."

"What? Why?"

"J-Just don't worry about it!"

I had no idea what was going on, but all right, I won't worry any longer. Either way, a real man had to own up to his mistakes.

"Rin."

"Yeah?"

"Um, I'm... I'm sorry. About a lot of things. I really am," I nodded to her in apology.

Whatever the details, whatever the result, if you messed up, you had to apologize. That was my belief. This took Rin aback, but she quickly recovered her composure.

"W-Well... I guess I took it too seriously as well... It's fine now."

She forgave me, it seemed. Blessed be the common past of old friends. I didn't want to ruin our friendship, either.

"Oh. I just remembered."

The time I had made a promise with Rin came to mind again. It'd been during our last year of grade school. We were in a classroom, and the sun had been as red as it was now.

"What you asked me was whether I'd eat your sweet-and-sour pork every day once you got good at it, right? So? Did you?"

"I... Um..."

Rin looked left, then right, and eventually at the ground. She was very confused now. Her face had turned red.

"So, I was thinking. Maybe there was a different meaning to that. I always took it as me getting a bunch of food for free, but maybe what you meant was—"

"N-No! That's right! Cooking gets better if you do it for others, right?! Yeah! That's what it meant!"

She'd gotten up from her chair and looked down at me. It was positively imposing.

"I guess, yeah. Like, I thought it could have been like one of those veiled romantic things in movies where it's a metaphor, but maybe not. I must have read too much into that."

"....."

"Rin?"

"Um... Y-Yeah! You read too much into that! Hahaha!"

Rin's laughter sounded uncomfortable, like she was trying to hide something. Well, if she didn't want to talk about it, I wasn't going to force her. There was something else I wanted to ask her, anyway.

"If you're back in Japan, does that mean your family has a restaurant again? Your dad made great food. I wanna eat it again."

"Oh, no... We... don't have a restaurant."

"Why?"

"My parents got a divorce..."

That surprised me. They'd looked like a happy couple, by all accounts. But I thought she wouldn't have lied about that. I looked at Rin. She looked depressed and unsure what to say to me.

"I had to go back to China because of that."

"I see..."

Now that I thought about it, Rin hadn't looked like herself back then. Like she was trying to hide something by being positive and bright.

"My mother has custody of me on paper. Women are in power now everywhere, so that makes sense, but..."

She was trying to sound upbeat again, but the tone of her voice was gloomy.

"I haven't seen my father in a year. I think he's doing well, though."

I didn't know what to say to her. I felt depressed as well, knowing that her parents had divorced. It had pulled her family apart. That was never good. There must have been something that forced this. I remembered her generous father, and also her hard-working mother.

—*Why? Just... Why?*

I couldn't bring myself to ask Rin. She was probably suffering the most from this.

"Family is hard, isn't it?"

I didn't know my own parents. Chifuyu was my only family, so I couldn't say I knew first-hand what she meant.

"Hey, Rin."

"Yeah?"

"Let's go have fun somewhere one of these days."

"Uh... Is that a da—"

"We can call Gotanda, too. Get the old crew back together."

"....."

For a split second Rin had looked incredibly happy, but now she had wheeled straight back around to gloominess. I didn't understand.

"No way."

She was pouting now. I was trying to do this for her, though. Is that not what friends are for?

"I-I'd only go if it's just you alo—"

Wham! The door to the infirmary was slammed open.

"Ichika! How are you feeling? I asked the nurses and... Oh."

Cecilia strode into the room, but stopped talking. She had seen Rin by my bedside.

"Why are you here? Ichika is a member of Class A. There is no reason for a girl from Class B to visit him, I should think."

"What are you talking about? I'm visiting him as his childhood friend. You're just a random stranger!"

"I-I'm his classmate! And I'm also his *exclusive* combat tutor as well!"

The emphasis on “exclusive” was strange. Cecilia also added that she was a National Cadet for good measure, but that only served to dig her hole deeper.

“All right. Then I’m going to be his exclusive combat tutor as well, starting tomorrow. After all, I’m also a National Cadet.”

“Y-You can’t!” Cecilia exclaimed.

“Why not? Ichika, you are fine with that, right?”

“Y-You’re not, right? Ichika?!”

Why were they asking me? I really didn’t care either way. I just wanted to be taught how to use an IS. Maybe Rin was a better fit? She had close-combat abilities, too. It was more of a multipurpose unit, but still.

“I think Rin is more compatible.”

“Wh...”

“Hehe... Yes, yes. There you have it.”

“Since she also has close-combat weapons.”

“.....”

“.....”

Both of them were dumbfounded. That had seemed like a perfectly decent reason to me.

“I suppose you’re right. Yes, she does have close-combat weapons, *if nothing else*. But I, Cecilia Alcott, will have to continue to teach him mid-range combat as his exclusive tutor.”

This time she stressed the “if nothing else.” Now it was Rin’s turn to look unhappy and glum. She was staring at me. Glaring, even.

—*What did I do wrong now?!*

“Well, then. Let us analyze today’s combat performance. Alone.”

“What are you talking about? Ichika and I were the ones fighting out there, so we should go over our performance together! Are you stupid?”

“Stu... Hmph. This is why I hate uncouth plebeians.”

“Better than being stuck up like you!”

“Excuse me?!”

“What?!”

Those two were really not getting along. Cecilia wasn’t really getting along with either Houki or Rin. I wished she’d try. She probably wasn’t going to, though.

—*Man... I want to go back to my room and sleep... I want to take a bath...*

My gloomy mood was being ignored. Instead, the other two kept fighting.

—*Sigh...*



Fifty meters underground, below the academy. Only those with level four clearance were allowed into these facilities. It was a secret base. The disabled IS unit had been brought here, without delay, to be analyzed.

Chifuyu, in the meantime, had been watching the arena's combat footage for two hours straight.

"....."

The room was dark, lit only by the illumination of the monitors. They made her face look cold and austere.

"Ms. Orimura?"

A window opened on her screen. It was an image from a surveillance camera outside the door. Ms. Yamada was standing there, book in hand.

"Come in."

The door opened, having heard this command, and Ms. Yamada strode in.

"The analysis report on the unit is in."

"Good. What does it say?"

"It... It was an unmanned unit."

The technology to make a unit unmanned did not exist anywhere in the world, be it remote control or stand-alone. One of these, or perhaps both of these, had been used with that unit. There was going to have to be a gag order because of this.

"It's unclear how it was made to move. Orimura's final attacked destroyed core elements of the system. We probably can't reconstruct its functions."

"What about the core?"

"The core is unregistered."

"I see."

She was expecting that. Ms. Yamada noticed that Chifuyu was feeling validated about something.

"Do you have an idea?"

"No, none. Not yet, anyway..."

Chifuyu looked back at the screens. Not as a teacher, but as a warrior. As a legendary pilot, once the best in the world. The focus in her eyes hearkened back to those days as she stared at the combat unfolding on screen.



"You're late!"

That was the first thing I heard when I came back to my room. My childhood friend was a demon.

"What were you doing? I'm hungry. I kept waiting for you."

"Waiting? What, you haven't eaten anything yet?"

"I told you that I was waiting for you."

—You could've just eaten without me...

But I didn't say that. That would probably have made her angry. I was learning!

"Let's go eat, then. Off to the cafeteria! We can still make it."

"W-Wait!"

Houki stopped me as I was about to leave. What now? We had little time before the cafeteria closed at eight. I wasn't going to dine on dried sardines or something.

"T-Today, uh... I... Um..."

"Is that... the smell of food?"

Freshly cooked food, at that. My stomach growled at the prospect of sustenance.

"There's something on the table. Wow! Fried rice! What's going on?"

The enticing smell I had caught was that of sesame oil. I was immediately hungry enough to eat.

"I-I, uh... M-Made this!"

"Really?"

"Why are you so surprised?!"

—*Well, anybody would be.*

I was mostly surprised that it wasn't traditional Japanese food. It was a strange turn of events. Was she trying to get something out of me? I had no money, so no problem.

"Well?! A-Are you going to eat, or what?"

"Oh, I'm gonna eat it. Why are you angry?"

"I-I'm not angry!"

She seemed angry when she answered me as well, but apparently that wasn't the case. If she said she wasn't angry, then she wasn't. The basis of human society was trusting one another, after all.

"So, can I eat?"

"Wash your hands first. And brush your teeth."

Everything had to be according to the rules for Houki. Perhaps doing this was normal at one point, but in our day and age, these customs were being abandoned by people of all age and sex. Still, I would have done it anyway. I didn't have to be told. I finished that up quickly. When I came back, Houki gestured impatiently for me to sit down. She was already waiting. I sat down and thanked her for the food.

"Thank you for the food."

"Hmm. Eat now."

I ate.

"....."

"How is it? Good, right?"

Houki looked at me proudly. I wasn't able to agree immediately.

"It has no taste..."

"Wh-What?! Let me try!"

Houki grabbed my spoon and ate some of the rice.

"It really has no taste..."

"Right?"

It looked just like Chinese fried rice was supposed to look, but it tasted like nothing. How was that possible? She probably hadn't used enough

flavoring... or any at all. It was extremely strange that the food had the right texture, then. It looked just about perfect. Was this magic?

"I-I must have forgotten! You can forget these things!"

"Forget the seasoning? I dunno, that sounds unlikely..."

"Shut up! I'll just eat it all, then!"

"I didn't say that. Come on, give me the spoon back."

I took the spoon from an irritated Houki and ate more rice. It had no taste, but I still made sure to savor it, for whatever that was worth. I was glad just to have something to eat, and a real man showed his gratitude by eating it up.

"Thank you."

I finished my plate and put down the spoon. I also folded my hands.

"....."

"Wh-What?"

Houki was looking quietly at me with an expression that was extremely difficult to explain. I could see elements of anger, happiness, joy... But it was none of them.

"D-Don't get the wrong idea!"

"Hm?"

"Today I... Had some very bad luck! Against all odds! Normally this always works!"

—*Okay. Didn't know that, but sure.*

I'd never seen Houki's food before, anyway. I guess the last time I'd seen her was in grade school, so it was no wonder, really.

"Why did you make Chinese food, though? Don't you like Japanese food a lot more?"

"F-Food is international. I wanted to prove that."

—*And you failed, so what was the point, really?*

Her food was so international it could have been anything.

"B-But... You know... If you insist, I will cook for you again."

"Hm? Oh, it's fine. It'd just be a bother for you. We can hit up the cafeteria."

"Y-You don't want to eat my food?!"

"That's not what I'm saying... Look, what's wrong? You haven't been yourself."

"I-I'm saying I'll cook for you every day if you want," she mumbled.

Her voice was now very quiet. Too quiet. I couldn't make out what she'd said.

"Th-This is your fault! How are you going to take responsibility for that promise?!"

"Promise? The one with Rin? We cleared that up."

"Wh-What?"

"Yeah, we cleared it up. I apologized and she forgave me."

"....."

She gave me a dubious look, one of distrust.

"Like that would be enough!"

"No, that's what happened."

She was being so stubborn. I didn't understand.

"And besides, you're throwing away something that could—"

Knock, knock.

I was still being held down by the machine gun fire of Houki's rhetorics when she was interrupted by a knock on the door.

"Um... Shinonono, Orimura... Are you there?"

That timid voice no doubt belonged to Ms. Yamada. I opened the door, and she came in. And yeah, it was her.

"What is it, Ms. Yamada?"

"Um, yes... You're moving."

"What?"

Moving? Who was moving? Both of us?

"Ms. Yamada, please tell us who is moving where."

"Y-Yes... I'm sorry."

Houki glared at her, and Ms. Yamada twitched like a small animal.

—Don't bully her, Houki.

She was still our teacher... Sort of.

"Um, you're moving, Shinonono. We have arranged a new room for you, so you won't have to live with him anymore."

—Live with him... Heh, that could be taken as a pun. Nice one, Ms. Yamada.

"Ichika."

"Y-Yeah."

She knew. Damn it. How?

"Um... I will help you gather your belongings. Let's get this done!"

"W-W-Wait. Does it have to be so soon?"

I didn't expect Houki to say that, nor had Ms. Yamada, apparently. She blinked a few times.

"Well... Yes, it does. We don't want a boy and girl your age to be living together, and I'm sure you can't relax, Shinonono."

"I-I'm..."

Houki didn't finish her sentence and stared at me.

—Oh, okay. I get what's going on.

"Don't worry about me. I'll be fine. I'll get up in the morning, and I'll even brush my teeth."

".....!"

Tching!

Weird. I could have sworn I heard something snap. Someone was angry with me.

"Ms. Yamada, I'm moving right now."

"O-Okay! Let's get started!"

Houki's sudden change of mood startled Ms. Yamada, and she twitched again.

"Should I help?"

"NO!"

Wow, she was so angry that if I had touched her, I would have cut myself. She was like a katana. It was best to just stay quiet.

"You're just horrible. Think about what I was trying to do..." Houki mumbled again, now filled with rage.

Anyway, Houki being Houki, everything was finished after barely an hour.

"Hm..."

I felt like the room had become twice as big with my roommate gone. That said, it felt a little lonely without her.

"Guess I'm gonna sleep. No use thinking about this."

I wanted to take a bath, but there was still no gender-separated timetable for the big bath. They'd told me it wasn't going to take much longer.

—It's pretty weird, though. Ever since I came here due to the IS, I met Houki and Rin again, and I even met Cecilia.

The way people met was strange. Reality was weirder than a novel. And light novels were more picture book than book, so the last one wasn't necessary. It was a bit insulting, even.

"Time for sleep."

I'd taken a shower and brushed my teeth. I had even changed, too. Granted, when I sat around the room I just wore shorts and a t-shirt, anyway.

—M'kay. Dream Town here I come.

Knock, knock. Someone was knocking on the door.

I was already in bed, but...

Wham, wham! Someone was knocking with their fist.

I ran to the door.

"Hello, who is th—"

"....."

Outside was Houki, frowning, after she had switched rooms just earlier.

"What, forget something?"

"....."

Houki didn't answer. She looked frustrated and unhappy, like a time bomb down to five minutes until detonation. Not that I'd ever seen a time bomb.

"What's wrong? Well, come in."

"No, this is fine."

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

"....."

"....."

—Hello? Earth to Houki?

"Houki, if you've got nothing to say, then I'm going to bed."

"I-I have something to say!"

Her sudden yelling startled me.

—*No yelling in the hallway. The dorm mother will get mad at you.*

"Th-There is a grade-separated tournament next month..."

Near the end of June, there was going to be a tournament where everyone could take part, unlike the class league match. It was separated by grade, and nothing more. The ones with a personal unit still had a huge advantage, though.

"I-If I win..."

Her cheeks turned pink, but Houki continued. She was embarrassed and looking down at the ground.

"I-If I win, I want you to go out with me!"

She pointed her finger at me.

"What?"

I was totally confounded. It almost seemed like a declaration of war. Not that I knew who was declaring war on whom, exactly.

End of Volume One.



Afterword: Volume One, a retrospective.

Hello. My name is Yumizuru. Hizu, hizu! (That's how I greet people.)

So, that was the first volume. Hm. Yes... Where to start? When I was 22, I quit my previous job because I got very sick. It was getting worse, and I had to spend a lot of time in the hospital. Afterward, I worked freelance, but that didn't work out very well due to illnesses still. This went on, and my health got worse for some time. It got so bad I had to get anesthetic injected straight into the epidural space of my spine, and this caused an infection, and I just barely avoided being paralyzed below the waist. One time I was sleeping with a 40-degree fever, and my last clients dissolved their contracts with me. That was when I kind of wanted to die or just disappear, but I lived on.

That was when I figured I might write a light novel, and I pitched what would become IS. Writing made me feel better, like I was actually doing something... I guess. Also, and I'm still their patient, but praise the Tokyo U hospital. By the way, something about my name, Yumizuru Izuru. I took the Yumizuru from my father, a shamisen player, and Izuru from my mother, who teaches ikebana. My brother is the reason I decided to be a novelist. I don't think he remembers, but when he was in university, we were talking in a Saizeriya restaurant in Kanazawa. I told him I wanted to be a novelist, but that I probably couldn't do it. He said I just had to try and it would work out. I really appreciated that. I'm grateful to my family.

While we're on the topic of thanking people, I'm grateful to my wife. That sounds a bit distant, doesn't it? But she always supported me, even when it was tough, and I couldn't thank her enough. I will love her forever.

Oh. Originally I meant to cover Cecilia a lot more in the first volume, but everyone got really mad and said I couldn't do that, so I dragged Rin here from the second volume. Originally Rin would have been in Class A and stuff. Anyway, there'll be surprises, so don't worry.

Bye! Byzu, byzu! (Following my style.)

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Infinite Stratos: Volume 1

by Izuru Yumizuru

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